

Dislocation in the Dramatic Text:
Writing the Family Drama in the 21st Century

And

For Want of a Better Word

by
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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree
MASTER of RESEARCH in PLAYWRITING STUDIES

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September 2013
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ABSTRACT

The family is a universal institution that has become the focus of numerous exemplary works of drama throughout performance history. My thesis play focuses primarily on the nature of family in our contemporary time; how it nurtures us to become the people we are and our subsequent journey toward, or resistance to, that family unit. Adopting an epic form the play reveals the disjointed family of a world made readily open to exploration and the departure from what we know as “home”. The accompanying essay reviews my play within the canon of similar play-texts and with reflections on playwriting itself as a craft.

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Dislocation in the Dramatic Text: Writing the family drama in the 21st century

From the Top

It was believed by Aristotle that ‘the most powerful conflicts in drama are staged between family members’ (Rosefeldt, 1996, p.13). Family is a universal institution; biologically unavoidable and socially fundamental to every human culture. However conventionally disparate your personal situation is, you are perpetually inhibiting at least one, if not multiple familial roles, i.e. mother, father, son, daughter, grandparent, spouse etc. Each and every role is emotionally charged with a myriad of expectations and responsibilities which we are required to fulfil. This family membership, inherent to us all, brings with it a complex practice of formalities and sentiment which are ingratiated in each of us from birth. It is therefore little wonder that for playwrights, from ancient arena to contemporary stage, the family still provides an inspirational source for potent drama.

This essay shall explore my personal treatment of the family drama with my given play, *For Want of a Better Word*, in relation to previous theatrical texts as well as the theories of playwriting as a craft. It will be a reflection on the creative process and a comparative discussion of successful past and contemporary plays which share structural or thematic frameworks to my own writing. With passing reference to a classicist’s prescription of the “well-made play” I shall discuss how my (and others) approach to writing the family conforms to and varies from the preconceived model. Amongst other well-versed playwrights, Steve Waters prescribes the task of playwriting as a “paradoxical” endeavour, in the ‘struggle to express inner life in outer action and word’ (2010, p.4). The question I ask myself is: what choices have I made to express this inner life through the dramatic medium? The intention of this essay is to maintain an objective approach to my own artistic work in

order to argue its relation to the theatrical canon of family-centric drama and playwriting itself.

Matter & Form

In his guide to playwriting, Stuart Spencer makes the connection between what the playwright opts for in terms of subject matter and the cultural ur-myth; that is

‘a story whose source is typically lost in the distant, unknowable reaches of prehistory, yet deeply embedded in the subconscious of the culture’
(2002, p.26)

According to Spencer then, each writer has within them a “ur-play” buried away in their own subliminal being (2002, p.27) and each play they write is in fact an attempt to recreate this unknowable story; or should be. Just as Aristotle describes drama as the imitation of an action, Spencer argues that each play is a representation of the myth within the writer. This concept is an expansion of the common advice to “write what you know” though perhaps more importantly, you should know *why* you are writing it. Whatever topic we choose to write on, however distinct from any prior writing, and whatever new ‘external goal one is aiming for, a writer’s innermost thoughts and feelings are going to come through’ (Gooch, 2001, p.5). It is therefore vital it would appear, to retain a sense of self-awareness when writing your play.

The reasons I had for writing my play, like much of the story and text itself, have evolved over time due to an increasing comprehension of what it is I have to say about the nature of family and subsequent relationships. From the very beginning, this play was going to concern itself with familial division, reflecting what I believed to be the nature of the often dislocated family of today. Theatre can be a means of unifying our knowledge, that of artist and audience, concerning how the world works. The playwright has an opportunity in possessing

a captive group 'to show them what you have learned about life, onstage, right before their eyes' (Farrell, 2001, p.8). Their role however is by no means a didactic one as the playwright may not necessarily be conscious of revealing something deeply inherent within themselves in the act of writing. Waters would suggest that all plays 'externalise the dramatist's own inner turbulence in the hope that they will resonate with those of a wider public' (2010, p.96). In this respect, it would appear inevitable that all plays originate from some level of autobiography. The live visceral action of the stage enables a writer, through use of character and circumstance, no matter how different to their own actual experience, to say: this is what I see and think about the world, do you feel the same? As the vision for my dynastical saga began to formulate within the imagination, some striking resemblances to my own life unwittingly manifested themselves before me. Through numerous developments, the story grew more distanced from my lived experience, though it was essential to retain 'the power of [my] emotional involvement with it' (Gooch, 2001, p.6). After all, the inspiration for the play you find yourself writing is your own subconscious, your own self. As the playwright, John Mortimer surmises; 'we live, and we give it away again, and it goes out into the world. And what precise changes it's gone through I think are a matter of mystery.' (Edgar, 1999, p.91)

My choice of title, one of the primary elements in the plays development, *For Want of a Better Word*, is a reflection of the inability to accurately articulate our emotions to those even closest to us. Characters in the play continually struggle to find the right words; unable to express themselves and instead discuss the weather or refuse to say anything at all. The word that is found wanting in the title is love, "the same thing every piece of art concerns itself with" (p.45) as Ethan concludes. Our language is a finite means of communication (especially on stage) filled with contradictions and misunderstanding. One word, such as love, cannot possess the multitude of feeling that it is intended to encompass. With the

overwhelming emotional “baggage” that comes with family, we can sometimes neglect to voice that which we feel most strongly about. It is this lack of articulation between those we love which provides the basis for my family drama.

Once I had established the basic *fabula*, that is, my story; a young man abandons the mother of his unborn son to begin a new life and the subsequent effect over all their lives; the initial goal, as with all playwriting, was the conversion to plot, or *sjuzet*. Plot is an issue of a play’s structure, of ordering narrative, which ‘estranges the raw material, and draws attention to its underlying meaning’ (Edgar, 2009, p.19). Drama is not just about the story itself but the *way* that story is told on stage. The Oedipus legend is an ur-myth of Ancient Greece and was dramatised in 429 BC by Sophocles, who chooses to plot the action within a single setting over a single day. Much of the story has taken place before the first scene and the facts of it are fed to us through exposition gained from the protagonists own investigation. Sophocles has concentrated the narrative elements on the *fabula* into a dramatically powerful *sjuzet*. This form of plot demonstrates how ‘by working on the present, the past determines the future... its revelation *is* the drama because it brings about what happens in front of us’ (Edgar, 2009, p.30). Oedipus’ discovery of the truth regarding the past is what destroys his family and this is what we, as an audience, play witness to.

If we take an updated version of this model, looking at the modern family drama of naturalism, Arthur Miller’s 1947 play, *All My Sons*, achieves a similar effect using the same form. Joe Keller’s past misdemeanour and his attempt to keep it hidden leads to the breakdown of his family and his own destruction. Both plays are heavy with back-story but are written in such a way so the action can be hung upon a revelation that initiates the change that is inherent to the dramatic model of theatre. Like all stories, these plays are journeys of discovery and as ‘an audience, it is the change we seek’ (Spencer, 2002, p.205) but that does not necessitate the playwright take us beyond the Keller’s back yard. As with *Oedipus*, this

play follows the Aristotelian concept of “idealist” tragedy which works on the emotional response of its spectators through such careful dramatic plotting. However it is not the only way such a story may be told to elicit a desired reaction.

During this middling time of theatrical change there came a form of theatre which rose out of a desire to question this dramatic model. The 1930s saw the practice and development of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, a form which took an alternate method of construction. The German playwright and practitioner was deliberately opposing the escapist naturalism and melodrama which was dominating the European stage of the time. His “materialist” vision of theatre demanded the spectator to see the human operating in the wider socio-political context in which they exist. Brecht’s writing departs from the long linear acts of previous drama into episodic narratives which highlight not merely the interpersonal relationships of characters, but the staggering force of their seemingly unavoidable social circumstances. As a model, the epic strives to remove the artistically crafted distraction of the drama to present something much closer to an unacknowledged reality. Arguably one of Brecht’s most famous plays, *Mother Courage*, tells the story of a woman who loses her children through war and the decisions it demands her to make. Unlike the revelations of Joe Keller’s past misdeeds in a time of conflict, we witness the rolling years pass whilst Anna Fierling endures and profits from the Thirty Years’ War. Given the numerous locations and characters which inhabit this and many Brechtian texts, the staging requires representational props or set pieces and actors must continuously adopt new roles. All of this was Brecht’s intention to alienate and thus awaken his spectators to the world beyond that created on stage and to consider the humanity it was self-consciously representing.

What a playwright decides they want to say with their material will determine how they are to go about relating it to an audience. In other words, subject matter dictates form; they have, what J. B. Priestley refers to as ‘a reciprocal dynamic relationship’ (2005, p.191). Priestley

argues the need for a balance between creativity and practicality; ‘between the imaginary and imaginative life within the play and the theatrical presentation of that life, what belongs to the stage’ (2005, p.191). A playwright must imagine the humanity within a theatrical context, making them as much a technician as an artist. Having unearthed the basic material of my story it became a question of learning (from example) how to find a way of presenting it to an audience.

A Time & A Place

Like Miller’s *All My Sons*, a number of twentieth century dramatists employ the Aristotelian unity of time and, perhaps more significantly space, when writing drama centred on the family. Eugene O’Neill’s semi-autobiographical *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Tennessee Williams’ 1955, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* and even Harold Pinter’s 1964, *The Homecoming*, are all examples of family centric works which share the setting of the home as the place where our drama unfolds. Though time is expanded slightly beyond that of “real time” by means of act breaks, they nevertheless play out within a limited frame. It is unsurprising a playwright would choose to plot their story in a place so widely recognisable to deal with those enormous conflicts amongst members of the close-knit family, buried deep in the history of the people and their familial environment. Location plays an incredibly significant part in any dramatic construction as ‘geography is destiny; where you are is who you are’ (Waters, 2010, p.51). This private milieu of the home invites the audience into the most intimate realm of these characters lives, revealing some of theatre’s most powerful “home-truths”. Due to this restriction of time and place, these home bound plots of the mid twentieth century are often referred to as “pressure-cooker” plays.

As Britain moved into the 1980s there came an ‘emergence of a generation of young female playwrights, who sought to express meaning through the manipulation of chronology’ (Edgar, 2009, p.111). A prominent example of this is Charlotte Keatley’s 1985 play, *My Mother Said I Never Should*, which approaches the family from a wholly female perspective through a string of mother-daughter (and grandmother, great-grandmother) relationships. Instead of plotting her story within a single time and place, Keatley leads the audience back and forth through the decades, transporting us from a living room in Cheadle Hulme during the blitz, to an office in 1970s Croydon. Tackling the saga of these four women in this non-linear fashion demands the actors playing them to flit from child to adult and back in the space of a scene. The stage itself cannot be made into a naturalistic world of four walls but instead must encapsulate the many times and locations in a single set. It is a place filled with possibility. The “wasteland” the four characters interact upon as their youngest incarnations is what Edgar refers to as ‘an area of ‘liminality’ where normally fixed conditions are open to flux and change’ (2009, p.75). Unlike the other scenes, here the characters can afford to play and relate in ways they can’t in the strict reality of consecutive time. Much of the way this play is written demonstrates the influence of Brecht’s own epic theatre: the short episodic scenes, the constant shifts in time, the use of juxtaposition to develop ideas. Through ordering her content in this form, Keatley achieves a structure that reveals the underlining meaning of her play’s action; that of the evolving yet constant role of the mother in twentieth century society.

Following on from this development in the juxtaposition of alternating zones of time and place, in more recent years ‘playwrights have been operating increasingly in disconnected time, putting two or more apparently disparate narratives together and inviting the audience to join up the dots’ (Edgar, 2009, p.113). One such example of how this is executed in a family drama is the 2008 play from Australian playwright Andrew Bovell, *When the Rain*

Stops Falling. This play, more than any other, was the inspiration for how I wanted my own text to operate. Like Keatley, Bovell glides across the spectrum of both dimensions, from 1960s London to Alice Springs in 2039, recounting the story of several characters whose impact on one another's disconnected lives is made so painfully apparent to us. The unlabelled "scenes" of this play work in a slightly more linear manner, with each of the multiple events revealing to the audience 'the past's ongoing relationship to the present' (Waters, 2010, p.88). There is a generational link between the characters that weaves a disturbing history that shapes the distant future into a tarnished cycle of broken parent-child relationships. It is exactly this dislocation of family which I aimed to portray in my play.

Unlike the unified nuclear family which dominated popular society in previous centuries, the contemporary model of "the family" is one of a wider-spreading and 'dense complexity' (Farrell, 2001, p.28). Revolutions in our culture throughout the twentieth century led to social changes in the traditional family unit. Developments in travel and communication made the world more accessible and so the family became more susceptible to division. A strong example in my play of this ever-widening clan is provided by Ethan, a businessman who works internationally, who claims of his family "you'll find one of us in every city from here to Reykjavik". (p.64) Adopting the Brechtian construction of my narrative meant being able to break apart the unity of the temporal/spatial dimensions, like the family itself. The audience are presented with every aspect of a dynasty divided and can perceive how the characters are 'pursuing independent goals that somehow intersect, in often unpredictable ways, to alter one another's lives dramatically' (Farrell, 2001, p.28). It proved fascinating to create a stage image where past can physically exist and act alongside the present as a means of revealing the meaning in my narrative. As it was originally intended by Brecht, this form and construction certainly empowers the text with clearly outlined social issues that are left to be addressed by those watching the performance.

The initial idea which dictated my overarching structure was the division of a father-mother-son family entity. Adam, Alma and Michael are divided by their environments and instances and therefore never interact with one another (with some minor technical exceptions) but instead they are presented forming a close relationship with another individual, thus establishing the three seemingly distinct narratives within the play. The most crucial aspect of what holds this triad of duologues together is that deeply embedded familial link. Where those single set plays of naturalism hang on the past to reveal itself, here 'the order of the scenes is chosen to achieve the maximum effect of juxtaposing the revelations contained within them' (Farrell, 2001, p.41). This play makes an investigation of the past as a means of learning; the essential task was ordering the narrative information to achieve this maximum effect. It became apparent that it was necessary to have at least one of my characters undertake this journey of uncovering the past along with the audience. Without initially realising such a character was present in my work, it is Abigail who brings the past with her into the present situation as an attempt to understand her personal family history. Recognising this, her function expanded to include that of narrator, guiding the audience to seek and uncover the play's inherent meaning. Drawing my play closer to the form, Abigail's narrative function is a staple of the epic, 'she will address the audience in an opening prologue and return' (2001, p.40). Her action not only supports that of her narrative with Alma but also the wider action of the play itself; the audience travel with Abigail from a place of ignorance to one of understanding.

Much like the example set by Keatley, I wanted the stage in my play to be an open space that allows for multiple settings. Whilst both the Michael-Ethan narrative and that of Alma-Abigail remain confined to those single locations over a stretched time, the Adam-Esther scenes have a desired freedom (much like the characters themselves) which takes us from a cafe in Edinburgh to the O'Hare International Airport in Chicago by way of a hotel bridal

suite. By retaining the two fixed locations operating together onstage, with the third variations occurring through minimal suggestive props, lighting or sound, the possibilities of configuration became increasingly tantalising. The potential for stage images aided the opportunity for physical, as well as narrative, juxtaposition and mirroring. Michael and Ethan can sit listening to *Madame Butterfly* in their Venetian apartment in 1991 whilst Alma begrudgingly watches that exact opera on her television in 2013 in the same instance, from our spectator's perspective. At the beginning of both acts we are provided with a dumb show of the characters operating within their own worlds in order to initiate an expectation of what will follow.

The task became to ingratiate the audience in this fluent structure early on so that I could take further liberties with it as the play progresses. Having characters inhabit and share the entire space enables the transition of time and place to move in a more seamless fashion. Another technique inspired by Bovell's play, is having characters enter and remain present in their own upcoming scene so we can move smoothly into that action. Alma is practically a permanent fixture of the set herself, confined her to battered armchair. Her fixed position becomes a symbol of her refusal to move on, rooted to the one "family home" in the play, made poignant by the revelation of Michael's death, that she has ceased in her role as mother and has therefore made herself redundant. My purpose in adopting this system is an attempt to 'underline the fluidity [I] want in production by not writing scene breaks at all' (Edgar, 2009, p.122). The first draft even avoided use of an interval to try and maintain a fluent whole. Instead I worked the scenes of my primary act into a climax, 'an excitement that accompanies the end of an act – the curtailment of the action, to lurch forward into an unknown future' (Waters, 2010, p.32). The first act ends on a question to which the audience should know the answer: "Who's Alma?" From this curtailment the audience now face an uncertain second act. To hold the audience in further suspense I bring Esther to the stage in a

wedding dress as the next act begins. However I deliberately choose the first scene to take place elsewhere, delaying the revelation and prolonging anticipation.

As the initially independent narratives begin to work toward their conclusions, they start to weave in and out of one another. In the penultimate scene of the first act we find Adam and Esther entering the flat in Venice, the place my audience has come to associate with Ethan and Michael, two decades earlier than the current inhabitants. Both scenes between the two couples are able to play out simultaneously. Similarly, in Michael's final moments, as he packs in preparation to leave the apartment, he is able to turn and enter Alma's scene, providing a physical account of the memory Alma has of the last time she saw her son alive. This in turn becomes our final glimpse of Michael before his final exit. Construction of this kind is comparable to that of a composer of a musical score, harnessing 'the power to potently select and assemble and orchestrate events, motifs or structures in time' (Waters, 2010, p.33). Employing this epic form I found a structural system in which to order my plot in a way that I believe to be truly theatrical; the shared space and simultaneous action would simply prove impractical in the realm of film or radio, unlike the unified family drama of O'Neill or Miller. Instead I found a means of expressing the increasingly apparent dislocated nature of the contemporary family unit. Perhaps my story is not wholly original and could be plotted any number of alternate ways, but 'Ideas are a dime a dozen, frankly. It's what you do with them that makes them worth something' (Spencer, 2002, p.247).

Angels & Demons

A staple of the evolving modern drama is the conscious influence of the "absent father" who remains a strongly influential force to those onstage without ever being physically present. If, like Aristotle said, the most powerful conflict is between family members, then the absence of a significant relative such as the father will surely lead to an internalisation of that

unresolved conflict. One aspect of the play I chose to write, is the nature of fatherhood which is, like the family itself, a culturally defined role; he is 'an unreality set apart, who, from the start is a being of language' (Rosefeldt, 1996, p.6). There is arguably no physical need for a father beyond the conception of a child. Adam abandons both his children, first in an attempt to free himself of the social conformism of parenthood (a fear instilled in him from observing his own father's life) and secondly as an escape from the life he realises he cannot live with. Though Adam is in fact present on stage, the audience are witness to his action, through plotting of events, it is impossible for him to communicate with either Michael or Abigail. To them he remains that long dead god, 'a disembodied figure behind the scenes, a paternal metaphor' (Rosefeldt, 1996, p.6).

In his study of the absent father, Rosefeldt references the likes of Willy Lomax and Hedda Gabler, even Hamlet, in demonstrating the effect this missing parental presence has over the outcome of a play; 'He acts as a catalyst for dramatic action' (1996, p.143). As you might rightly expect, the effect is not a positive one. Rosefeldt refers to such characters as "lost children" who prove to be failures in the face of their loss. What I realised, to my authorial benefit, is that my play was in possession of two strong yet different examples of a lost child in Abigail and Michael. Rosefeldt makes the point that is it the father, who 'initiates the quest, spawns imitators or doubles who trace his path' (1996, p.11). Michael achieves this by unwittingly replicating Adam's journey; he deserts Alma and finds himself in the very apartment his father occupied twenty years earlier. Abigail intentionally retraces Adam's steps by leaving her Edinburgh home to live in Manchester. Like her father, she is running away from accepting the responsibility of acknowledging her child's right to a father. Adam himself chose to start his new life in Scotland due to his ancestral link to the country. Both children have associative props that gather in significance, acting symbols of their connection to the lost parent: the letter to Alma and the sketch of Esther. Because the reunion with the

absent father is ultimately a futile impossibility, the quest often proves to be ‘a self-destructive one’ (Rosefeldt, 1996, p.10).

The play opens with Abigail’s description of the recurring dream she had growing up, which she experiences again for the first time in years. She claims the dream features a vision of a male faceless “Angel” who guides her across a frozen body of water and is a constant source of comfort. Abigail admits the Angel is a comforting presence. Michael however, opens the second act with his description of a similar scenario in which he is dragged along the ice by a malevolent male figure, referred to once as a “demon”. These two versions of the dream highlight the connection between these siblings whilst demonstrating the different effect the paternal spirit has upon them. As the force of religion becomes increasingly distilled in modern life, the lost father, like that of the diminishing god, becomes ‘a mythical and almost transcendental image in a world that [has] lost its faith transcendence’ (Rosefeldt, 1996, p.39). Both characters match the lost child profile; ‘alienated from themselves and the world that surrounds them’ (1996, p.10), Michael stewes alone with increasing paranoia in the apartment while Abigail is a young pregnant singleton in an unfamiliar city. However it is Michael who fully performs the role to its foregone conclusion. In the search to uncover their identity, Abigail succeeds through a reversal of her expectations whilst Michael takes the same route as his father: Michael drowns the same year Adam goes missing, last seen walking on the ice of a frozen lake. But where Michael fails, Abigail gains; she finds a new surrogate mother in Alma which leads to her rejection of Adam’s letter (that which she longed to know) and repenting the anger she held towards her mother, Esther. In her final address to the audience, Abigail admits the dream is still recurring but her “Angel” is now absent. The journey is completed by her return home to face what her father never could, having learnt from his past example.

Subtext & Platform

The term “action” in playwriting is most commonly regarded as what a character *wants* and it is their pursuit of this desire, in whatever manner they choose, which we observe on stage. Every scene is a moment, ‘a form of action and an instance of change, even if that change is barely visible on the surface’ (Waters, 2010, p.10). If we accept action as the text brought to life through performance, the physical realm of the stage, then I would argue it is merely the middle ground between two invisible planes of interaction. We absorb many things in the active process of watching a play. The dramatic medium confronts its audience on both an emotional and intellectual level; it is my opinion that a play should be intended to make us think and feel in equal measure. Beneath the surface of any drama we find the subtext of a play whilst above it is what I consider a “platform” – an unseen space above the action where the existential ideas of the text play out on a cerebral plane of thought. Subtext is that which concerns the inhabitants of the imaginary world of the play; their motivation, personal history, social upbringing, psychological standing etc. Whereas the platform deals in the thematic concerns that go beyond the story itself and relate to aspects of the human condition which the playwright is addressing through his text.

Gooch tells us ‘the questions most directors, actors and audiences ask of a play is ‘what’s it about?’’ (2001, p.4) and whilst this enquiry could be answered with a brief synopsis, what the question is truly asking is in regards to what aspects of life does the play address. The drama inevitably becomes itself a platform for a wider conversation and as audience we ‘are drawn into a ‘discussion’ with the author who is concerned to place evidence on the stage before us’ (Stylan, 1965, p.36). Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is not, for example, about a prince’s inability to avenge his father’s murder; it is about mortality, deception and betrayal amongst a multitude of basic human apprehensions. Equally my play is not about Abigail’s search for her identity but it is in fact a debate on themes of parenthood, responsibility and obligation, blame and

trust. Waters attests ‘the power of any play derives from the power of argument within it’ (2010, p.173). The longevity of a play, its continuous relevance and chance for revival, rests in the strength of the debate which operates in the heart of it. Our reason for producing and watching *Hamlet* on a constant basis is due to its inherent debate which is still on-going, there can be no definitive outcome from any one production; those themes which the drama becomes a platform for are still in conflict.

Subtext has the purpose of ‘serving to add other levels of meaning to what’s happening on the surface’ (Spencer, 2002, p.40) that elevates a character beyond a functional mouth-piece for the author. Where the likes of Brecht often draw representational figures in broad stereotypes to highlight the social effects on humanity, in the dramatic models of Miller and other such playwrights, characters are intentionally written to be fully-realised individuals. Such dramatic works avoid the didactic purposes of epic theatre and disguise the voice of the playwright in their fictional world. In this vein, Spencer argues that ‘audiences are not interested in what the playwright has to say. They are interested in what the characters have to say’ (2002, p.192). I never intended my own piece as an overt presentation of my sociological ideology but instead wanted to retain the naturalism of a dramatic model. Therefore subtext became a vital aspect of creating synthetically realistic characters; like ourselves, they do not operate merely in the present but they must come from somewhere and behave accordingly.

Adam is motivated to flee his paternal responsibility based on the experience of observing his own father's life; his action is to avoid the social convention of the family unit in order to be a “free” person. The pursuit of his action is complicated by feelings of guilt and duty which are instilled further by Esther. It is the emotional complexity of the characters which controls their behaviour in often surprising ways; it is the influence of their often unspoken subtext. This invisible current below the action of a play provides that emotional impact

which audiences are so responsive to. Without the foundations of subtext an audience is less likely to care about the characters and consequently unwilling to listen to the concepts at play in the text. Audiences must care in order to reflect on what they see. We participate in watching drama to know more of ourselves. A play can only work when it affects both head and heart. For a playwright, their underlying hope is ‘that everyone will come away afterwards feeling in some sense confirmed’ (Gooch, 2001, p.20). Audience and actor alike will leave the theatre with a confirmation in what they always believed to be true and have regained that knowledge to approach the world anew.

Page & Stage

‘best to think not in terms of writing on the page, but writing on the stage’
(Gooch, 2001, p.19)

For the most part, the playwright’s role in theatre is solitary. Their work is a vision unique only to themselves. However that solitude, the numerous redrafts and continuous editing, must eventually open up into the wider theatrical context. That individual’s vision must be shared with a host of others, understood by them and applied to their many functional roles in order to complete a fully realised dramatic entity. Waters compares the playwright’s job to that of an architect; they ‘produce blueprints for a work that will need others to realise and that will be achieved through a myriad of compromise and acts of persuasion’ (2010, p.193). It was this point in my own writing process, the performance of an extract from my developing play, which became the most valuable learning curve, particularly in terms of considering my work becoming the raw material for other artists to work with. Comprehending the practicalities of writing for the stage led to increasingly positive advances in my subsequent edits. As Priestley had observed, the playwright is a technician as much as say, the lighting designer.

Though extracts of my initial drafts had been read and discussed in groups with other writers, it was watching it “on its feet” with an experienced director and actors which demonstrated to me exactly how my words were interpreted and expressed. I was instantly aware of what needed changing; those lines or directions which worked perfectly in my head proved redundant or confusing in reality. Observing the actors getting to grips with the characters I had created was both thrilling and daunting. Seeing the people I had scribed to paper coming to life provided that third dimension which my imagination alone could not. Questions from the actors verified for me what needed to be addressed in the writing; if any feature was unclear to a second party then my task was to clarify those perhaps ambiguous sections in the text. Unlike the novelist, playwrights are writing for a reader who must interpret those fictions for their own creative purposes; they must remain aware that ‘the playability of a character, the scope it gives an actor, is a critical and not secondary consideration’ (Waters, 2010, p.112). The playwright is constantly working for the comprehension and creative satisfaction of others who are going to take their pages and pages of mere words to the next level of this communicative process of theatre.

It was the feedback I received from the director of my extract, an experienced professional, which most significantly altered my approach to the play I was still in the process of re-writing. In the half-completed draft she had obtained from me, the periods of time were vastly different: the Abigail-Alma scenes were set in the near future, 2027, whilst Ethan and Michael were living in 2006. This had been the case for much of my development in an attempt by me to show universality in the nature of family regardless of time. My director suggested that audiences would be distracted by setting these scenes in the future, questioning whether it was a believable world instead of focusing on the narrative of the actual scenes. Though adjusting the scenes, taking all three storylines back by about fifteen years and thus making the scenes with Alma contemporary, meant some

minor reconsiderations but the overall structure remained intact. Abigail becomes a relatable female figure from the world as we know it today. Following the voice of experience, I finally took my directors other recommendation of the crucial necessity for an interval which I had been resisting throughout with the desire to keep the play as one fluid piece. Much of what I took from being party to the rehearsal process of my text became instrumental when I returned to the page once more. It was the practical outside voices which aided in identifying what I had been failing to see and had struggled with throughout the solitary act of writing. Being overprotective about my vision, clinging to my precious original conception, was in fact holding me back. My short-sightedness was preventing me from finding the dramatic potential in my script which required that objectivity to lead me to fill those questionable gaps in my work. Each act of writing is a process of learning and the lesson I came to treasure was that ‘Nothing is sacred, and nothing too trifling to be overlooked’ (Spencer, 2002, p.231).

Curtains

Stylan declares that ‘drama must always make order out of life’ (1965, p.36), it must reveal to us that which we always knew to be true about ourselves and the universe as we comprehend it. The playwright works toward that artistic revelation for those who perform and those who observe their written creation. Plays are ‘among the most powerful means of storing and transmitting knowledge in human culture’ (Holland & Scolnicov, 1991, p.140). The knowledge originates from the writer and is transmitted through a process of writing text and reading, from rehearsal to performance and a final reception from the audience. Though a dramatist must make sense from the chaos of life, there is nothing less ordered or more baffling than the pursuit of writing for the stage. The playwright is a profound catalyst in the

creation of theatre, amongst the increasing number of alternative stimuli, and that possessed knowledge of their chosen subject is paramount to the successful reception of their script.

What I endeavoured to create was a play which presented the increasing norm of the dislocation amongst a family, reflecting a personal impression of the institution in our current time. The process undertook a deal of self-education in the practicalities of writing for the stage, experimentation with epic form and finding my voice in response to the material. Having achieved the completion of writing one play, Spencer hastily reminds me that you ‘only learn to write the play you’re writing at the moment’ (2002, p.173). Wherever the inspiration for my next work arises, it will require a new process of self-education in the skills particular to that next theatrical innovation. Though the learning resumes with each new beginning to a play it does not necessitate that what we have learnt from experience cannot influence our every step as we endeavour once more towards making order out of life.

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For Want of a Better Word

A play by Jack Robertson

"Sometimes life takes hold of one, carries the body along, accomplishes one's history, and yet is not real, but leaves oneself as it were slurred over."

D. H. Lawrence

"And if the going gets rough, I can brave it,
If I set myself straight from the start. You see..."

I'm a Manchester Boy
Me Mum's pride and joy,
A chip off the old block, me Dad"

Davy Jones

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh."

Genesis 2:24

Characters & Setting

The following play takes place between 1967 and 2013

Manchester 2013

ABIGAIL STONE, *late 20s*

ALMA JOHNSON, *mid 60s*

Venice 1991

MICHAEL JOHNSON, *early 20s*

ETHAN COLE, *mid 30s*

Edinburgh/Venice/Chicago 1967-1972

ADAM KENNEDY, *mid 20s*

ESTHER STONE, *mid 20s*

On the text

/ in a line indicates the start of the succeeding line

- indicates an interruption

... indicates unarticulated thought

*** Note** – Though aspects of the stage directions are specific in parts, in particular the numerous doorways to off-stage rooms or locations, they are more suggestive of the environment than concrete requirements. Apart from that which proves essential, the performance space should remain as bare as possible, allowing for imaginative sets and the increase in fluidity.

ACT ONE

Let there be light.

There is a young man standing on the highest peak of a long dead volcano; watching the sun rise, he smiles. Below him, the world is new.

A woman in her mid-sixties treads across her small living room, she is weak and slow; enduring a violent coughing fit, the woman reaches her chair and slumps into it, resting.

One man waits for another in an airport. He wears a white linen suit.

A young woman is sitting on a train travelling to a country she has never been.

Her name is ABIGAIL.

She begins speaking to us...

ABIGAIL. He came back to me, last night, as I was sleeping. My Angel. After all this time – I can't say how many years – he returned. And as ever his visitation remains a mystery to me. Like so much of my life; spent in the dark. But my angel is always welcome. His presence is always a comfort. Always.

I call him an angel though I'm not of any particular faith in that sense, thanks to a devoutly irreligious upbringing. My mother was Jewish. Or at least her parents were. Having grown up without any belief in the divine I still find "Angel" is the only word that fits. He doesn't have wings or a halo; he's not glowing or breathing fire or singing from the clouds – but he is an Angel, at least to me.

‘Course I’m not even certain it is a *he*... you can never really see the face in dreams. But I think of him as a *he*. It feels like a *he*.

It’s the same each time – in the dream:

I’m standing on a large body of water, a lake or an ocean or something, and it is completely frozen over. It’s a cold, moonless night. And there’s snow. And I can feel the ice creaking beneath my feet as I carefully take step after step across the brittle surface. There’s blood rushing in my ears and it is delicate and terrifying and every one of those steps could be my last.

And there he is. As if from nowhere.

My Angel.

And he’s holding out his hand to me. And I take it. It’s warm.

We walk together, him leading, one little step at a time.

And I’m not scared anymore.

And I know we’re going to make it.

The young man is crying but he barely notices – after a moment, he leaves.

I don’t remember a time when I didn’t have this dream on a regular basis; ever since I was a little girl, seven or eight years old maybe; around the time we moved here from the States. It came to me less and less as I grew older. Until now.

And I don’t know if it is because of the dream but I always find snow comforting. Perhaps it’s another thing from my childhood. But to me, snow always has the feeling of home. It’s the way it falls... drifting.

There was the faintest snowfall, I know there was, as I took the taxi through the city, heading toward the station. A sign from the Angel. It was still dark and the last revellers were finally making their way home. Couples were huddling against the cold. One man was urinating in a doorway, warbling *Auld Lang Syne* as loud as he could. And to think I spent the early hours of my new year hallucinating about angels and waking up every hour to vomit. I must be going mad.

I am doing the right thing. But I don't know...

We pull up at Waverly, far too early; determined not to miss my train. First train of the day, of the year.

And it is bitter cold. But there's snow... (*looks up*)

A studious girl in her early twenties crosses quickly, laden with folders and books, clearly in a hurry. She drops her umbrella but fails to notice and continues, off.

I was the first on the platform. Other passengers arrived. Nobody spoke; too cold and too early for chatter. Wrapped in two jumpers and a thick coat, I shuffled my feet to try and stay warm.

Not one message on my phone. I checked. Repeatedly. I don't know what I was expecting. Anything. Something that might make me change my mind at the last second. Nothing. I can't say I'm not surprised.

By the time the train arrived there were quite a number of us boarding; little nods and brief eye contact. Settling into the warm carriage, I barely heard the voice of the driver as we began moving.

A lonely exodus. A new life.

A new young man, carrying an old suitcase, approaches his lover in the airport. When they see one another they tightly embrace before the suited man takes the case

and leads the other away.

It's not a mission. That's not the word I'm thinking of. I had been planning the trip for so long in the back of my mind. Like, the very back of my mind. What *is* that word? But when I heard about the job opportunity it just seemed like the world, the universe, was yelling at me. Ever get that? I had to go; it's an adventure. Is it? Perhaps the particular timing was far from desirable, but when exactly is life anything close to perfection?

As soon as the snow came it was gone.

It was nearly an hour before I noticed we were even in England.

Then it began to rain.

A distant rumble of thunder, followed by the sound of heavy rainfall.

ABIGAIL moves to pick up the dropped umbrella and opens it.

Pilgrimage! That's the word I was trying to think of. I think. Well it probably isn't the best word for it. It's a little grand. But I'll make do.

Not sure how I was expecting to feel at finally taking this pilgrimage but it is never as... dramatic, as you think it might be. You have to keep reminding yourself you're not in a film. There's no poignancy in the weather or moving underscore; just a little anxiety and water-retention.

I am doing the right thing.

The rain showed no sign of stopping as we made it into Manchester and I was forced to take another taxi to my new temporary digs. My new home city loomed above me through the blurring rain as it slid across the car window. I'm staying in this grey sort of building in a

room far too small for a human dwelling which is the oddest shade of green and has a charming view of a brick wall.

ABIGAIL closes the umbrella and stands, visibly exhausted by her journey.

Before I can think of doing anything else I flop into the bare single mattress, close my eyes and take some deep breaths.

ABIGAIL remains standing, eyes closed and breathing deeply.

The first young man, ADAM, enters with a steaming cup of tea. He is soaking wet. Sitting down at a cafe table, he produces a small brown paper bag from his coat. Inside he recovers a newly purchased pad of paper and a fresh pencil.

He begins by writing two words at the top of the page and stops, unable to continue.

Pause.

I lay there, trying to listen to the rain. But there's blood rushing in my ears and it is delicate and terrifying. And I feel alone. And I remember that I'm not. But I'm no less afraid.

I check my phone again and there's no messages. I lean over to unzip the front pocket on my suitcase and take out the thick card folder which I've kept it safely tucked away in. I take out the letter and stare at the name on the envelope, which is sealed tight. This letter...

She produces a sealed letter from her handbag and stares down at it.

Am I doing the right thing? I don't know.

I don't know what made me give up the little life I had to deliver this.

I don't know why my Angel came back to me.

I don't know what I don't know.

I guess that some questions are easier to answer than others.

ABIGAIL exits.

The sound of heavy rainfall...

A cafe in Edinburgh – October 1967

It is a crowded greasy-spoon, full of steam and noise. ADAM sits opposite an empty chair, staring at his paper, still unable to continue writing.

The woman laden with books, ESTHER, approaches the table, carrying a coffee.

She is soaking wet and speaks with an American accent.

ESTHER. Anybody sitting here? Could I – ?

She sits before awaiting an answer, removing her coat and burying her head in her folder.

ADAM tidies away his writing implements and stares out of the window as he sips his tea.

Pause.

ADAM. Bad weather this isn't it?

ESTHER. *(without really looking up)* Sure is.

ADAM. Scotland, eh?

ESTHER. Yes. Scotland.

ADAM. 'Got caught out. No brolly. That's how I came to be in here. *(pause)* You weren't ready for it either by looks of it...

ESTHER. I dropped my umbrella.

ADAM. Shame. *(pause)* Doesn't look as if it's gonna be stopping anytime soon either...

ESTHER. *(looking up, direct)* Can you answer me something?

ADAM. Yeah?

ESTHER. What is the British obsession with discussing the weather?

ADAM. What – ?

ESTHER. I'm curious. From what I've seen so far it seems the only subject your people find stimulating enough to initiate conversation. Why is that?

ADAM. Uh...

ESTHER. I mean, we *all know* it's raining. Look at me. I'm drenched. I'm aware of the fact it's raining. But it doesn't matter if it's a colleague or a total stranger , for some reason, the first thing you want to point out is the weather. Why? Why is that, uh – ?

ADAM. ...Adam.

ESTHER. Esther Stone. Now why is that, *Adam*?

ADAM. What - ?

ESTHER. Weather-talk. What's it all about, Adam?

ADAM. Well... the weather's important, isn't it?

ESTHER. You think?

ADAM. 'Is to us.

ESTHER. Why?

ADAM. I don't know.

ESTHER. A communal appreciation of the natural phenomena perhaps?

ADAM. Maybe some people would just rather talk about the weather.

ESTHER. Than what?

ADAM. Dunno. What they should be talking about...?

ESTHER. Repression. Now that *is* British.

ADAM. Sorry but, why are you so bothered if we talk about the rain so much?

ESTHER. A morbid curiosity with exotic cultures. I'm in the middle of studying for my doctorate in anthropology here. Hence the notes.

ADAM. Anthropology? That's bones and stuff, like fossils?

ESTHER. Sort of. Well, no, actually; that's not it at all.

ADAM. Oh. Give us a read then, (*taking one her books*) must be interesting if you want to be a doctor of it.

ESTHER. Knock yourself out. Murdock's a real page turner.

ADAM attempts to read a passage in the first chapter, his eyes darting up occasionally at ESTHER, who is trying to make notes but she continuously looks up at ADAM.

ADAM. Some big words in 'ere.

ESTHER. Don't strain yourself.

ADAM. I prefer pictures.

ESTHER. You don't say.

ADAM. Like big landscapes; of cities and such. Like Lowry. He's great, him.

ESTHER. Who?

ADAM. Oh, just part of my local exotic cultural background.

He smiles at her but she refuses to look up but smiles in spite of herself.

ADAM. *(conspiratorially)* My tea's gone cold.

ESTHER. *(imitating him)* It has?

ADAM nods.

ESTHER. *(whispering)* You could get another one?

ADAM. Nah.

ESTHER. Why not?

ADAM. Scared.

ESTHER. What of?

ADAM. The woman behind the counter

ESTHER. Oh?

ADAM. She's got a beard.

ESTHER almost bursts out laughing. ADAM grins as she composes herself.

ADAM. Tea is never as good when someone else makes it.

ESTHER. Can't say I drink much tea.

ADAM. You haven't been here long enough then.

They both smile. Pause.

ESTHER. This coffee sucks too. British coffee sucks.

ADAM. Everything's better in America, eh?

ESTHER. Not everything.

ADAM. So where in America you from?

ESTHER. Chicago. Thereabouts.

ADAM. You're even further from home than me.

ESTHER. Mmm?

ADAM. Manchester. You know it?

ESTHER. Is it in Scotland?

ADAM. (*laughing*) No. No! England.

ESTHER. You don't say.

ADAM. It's actually my first time.

ESTHER. I'm sorry?

ADAM. In Scotland.

ESTHER. Oh?

ADAM. Yeah. Grandad was a Scot. He never shut up about the natural beauty of his homeland. And I've never been. So here I am.

ESTHER. Is that so?

ADAM. As of this morning actually. I'm on a sort of.... adventure.

ESTHER. An adventure?

ADAM. Sort of.

ESTHER. What kind of an adventure?

ADAM. The "starting a whole new life" kind.

ESTHER. What went wrong with your old one?

ADAM. (*looking out of the window*) Does it rain much here?

Pause. ESTHER, smiling to herself, closes her files and leans across the table.

ESTHER. It never rains but it pours.

They smile at one another.

The sound of heavy rain continues...

An apartment in Giudecca, Venice – March 1991

A simply furnished lounge; a sofa, small coffee table and a framed pencil sketching of a woman's face on the wall by the large window. We hear muffled voices and a key turning in the lock. ETHAN, in his white suit, opens the door to let MICHAEL through and follows carrying his suitcase.

Both of them are soaking wet.

MICHAEL. When you said Venice I hardly imagined the weather was going to be worse than it is in Manchester. I could have stayed at home!

ETHAN. It rains here too I'm afraid.

MICHAEL. I hate rain.

ETHAN. Well you wouldn't want to go living in the desert would you?

MICHAEL. At least I'd get a tan.

ETHAN. *(removing his jacket)* We're a little out of season right now.

MICHAEL. I'm fucking freezing.

ETHAN. Sorry.

MICHAEL. I was expecting sun. People sat outside cafes like in the films. I dressed for sun. Ethan! Look at me. I'm drenched!

ETHAN. Take those off, I'll fetch you something fresh.

MICHAEL. *(removing wet clothes)* Can I wear your funny dressing gown?

ETHAN. *(heading into the bedroom)* Do you mean the kimono?

MICHAEL. Have you got it here?

ETHAN. *(off)* I'll dig it out.

MICHAEL. I weren't prepared for this. Didn't even pack a brolly.

ETHAN. I'm sorry Michael. The forecast said cloudy. I had no idea the heavens were going to open like this.

MICHAEL is now down to his underwear. ETHAN enters with a male silk kimono – dark purple with a red dragon embossed, knee length.

ETHAN holds it out for MICHAEL slip into.

MICHAEL. It's not your fault. But when you said Venice...

ETHAN. Was that the only reason you came; the promise of sun and Italian men?

MICHAEL. *And* so I could wear your queer pyjamas.

ETHAN. I knew it.

MICHAEL turns round to ETHAN, kissing him with a prolonged intensity and biting his bottom lip.

ETHAN. Ouch. Cannibal.

MICHAEL. I missed you.

ETHAN. And I missed you.

Pause.

MICHAEL. Thanks.

ETHAN. What for?

MICHAEL. For letting me come. And for paying the flight and –

ETHAN. How was it?

MICHAEL. Couldn't get to sleep. Some little shit behind me kept kicking my seat and screaming the whole time – his ears were hurting – and his mum were just sat there doing bugger all – I was *this* close to turning round and screaming back at him.

ETHAN. But you didn't. Did you?

MICHAEL. Some people shouldn't have kids.

ETHAN. Which people exactly?

MICHAEL. People who can't control 'em.

ETHAN. Not keen on having children then?

MICHAEL. Why would you ask that?

ETHAN. Would you like to unpack?

MICHAEL. No.

ETHAN. Well I'll just put your bag in my room.

MICHAEL. *Our* room.

ETHAN smiles as he carries the suitcase into the bedroom. MICHAEL looks about the room.

MICHAEL. Not bad this place. It's sort of... what's that word?

ETHAN. Rustic?

MICHAEL. Naff.

ETHAN. (off) I am so glad you like it.

MICHAEL. (*observing the sketch*) Nice bit of art work.

ETHAN. Oh, that drawing? It was here before I arrived, like most of the furniture. I thought you might like to adjust the place to your own liking. Take it down if you find it's too naff for you.

MICHAEL. She's beautiful. I'm almost jealous. (*reading the signature*) ARK... Who's ARK?

ETHAN. (off) Pardon?

MICHAEL wanders over to the window and stares out, irritated by the weather.

MICHAEL. Do people ever fall in?

ETHAN. (off) I'm sorry?

MICHAEL. Ethan?

ETHAN. Yes?

MICHAEL. What are you doing in there? I said – do people ever fall in the canal?

ETHAN. (*re-entering*) I've yet to see it happen but perhaps I've not been here long enough.

MICHAEL. I can't swim.

ETHAN. At all?

MICHAEL. Nope.

ETHAN. How can you make it to twenty-two and not know how to swim?

MICHAEL. (*defensively*) I never learnt.

ETHAN. Why not?

MICHAEL. At school they used to take us to these old swimming baths in Harpurhey, they stank and I hated it. People piss in that water. Simon Brewster told us; said it all the time. It's rank.

ETHAN. They put chlorine in –

MICHAEL. I weren't doing it. Every time they took us I told 'em I were too sick.

ETHAN. That worked?

MICHAEL. I could vomit on demand. No hands. Still can. You wanna see?

ETHAN. I believe you.

MICHAEL begins pacing idly about the room, taking it in before stretching out on the sofa.

MICHAEL. I've never flown before. It takes it out of you. Sit with me. Sit...

ETHAN sits on the sofa and MICHAEL adjusts them both so that their legs overlap.

MICHAEL. Give me one of your posh cigarettes.

ETHAN. *(taking a packet from his inside breast pocket)* I wish you'd let me buy you some at the airport. Then you could stop pinching mine.

MICHAEL. I don't smoke.

ETHAN. Then you won't want one.

MICHAEL. *(child-like grasping)* Mmm-mmm!

ETHAN produces a cigarette and places it in MICHAEL's mouth before lighting it.

MICHAEL. Thanks.

ETHAN. You're welcome.

MICHAEL. I'm dead grateful, you know.

ETHAN. It's only a cigarette

MICHAEL. No. For letting me stay. I know I wasn't properly invited or –

ETHAN. I'm thrilled you're here, really. You've no idea.

MICHAEL gives the cigarette to ETHAN, who takes a deep drag.

MICHAEL. Lucky to have you, aren't I?

ETHAN. Well, you won me.

MICHAEL. I stole you. *(taking back the cigarette)* He's not rung you or anything has he?

ETHAN. We've not spoken since I left England.

MICHAEL. Good. He can't have you back.

He squeezes ETHAN'S leg tight, grinning.

ETHAN. Can I make you something to eat?

MICHAEL. Nah.

ETHAN. Did you eat on the plane?

MICHAEL. Couldn't stomach it.

ETHAN. You should eat.

MICHAEL. I'm not hungry.

He returns the cigarette to ETHAN who smokes it. Long pause. Discomfort.

ETHAN. How did you leave things with your mother?

MICHAEL turns to look out of the window. Brief pause.

MICHAEL. Looks like the rain's calming down a bit.

ETHAN. If it stops I could take you out tonight. Somewhere nice for a meal.
Would you like that?

MICHAEL. (*retrieving the cigarette*) I would!

ETHAN. I know a few good places round here. You'll love them.

MICHAEL. You can give me a proper tour tomorrow.

ETHAN. I have clients tomorrow.

MICHAEL. But I've only just got here.

ETHAN. And I had to rearrange all my meetings today so I could pick you up –

MICHAEL. Sorry. Didn't realise I was gonna be *such* a burden.

ETHAN. Don't be silly –

MICHAEL. Fuck off. I'm not bein' silly.

ETHAN. Of course not. I'm sorry, but I really have to –

MICHAEL. I get it. (*stubs out cigarette – pause*) Play me some music then.

ETHAN. Any requests?

MICHAEL. What was that Japanese opera you made me listen to in that hotel?

ETHAN. *Madame Butterfly* is by an Italian. And you hated it.

MICHAEL. But I'm sophisticated now. Look at me. I'm a Venice-ean now.

ETHAN. A Venetian.

MICHAEL. Put it on. I feel like lounging in your puffy dressing gown, smoking fancy fags and listening to opera with you. Go on.

ETHAN stands and searches for the record.

ETHAN. Here we are...

The opening to Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" plays.

MICHAEL. (playfully eccentric) Delightful! Now come on, sit. Cigarette?

ETHAN resumes his place on the sofa and lights another cigarette, which they share.

MICHAEL turns his body and lies down with his head in ETHAN'S lap.

ETHAN. Happy?

MICHAEL. Ecstatic.

ETHAN begins stroking MICHAEL'S hair.

MICHAEL. ...Ethan?

ETHAN. Yes?

MICHAEL. ...Does it rain a lot here then?

ETHAN. Oh, it never rains, but it pours.

ETHAN leans down and kisses MICHAEL on the head. MICHAEL smiles sadly.

The music continues, along with the sound of rain...

A house in Manchester – January 2013

"Madame Butterfly" is now emitting from the television, which is the only source of light in the living room besides the net-curtained windows. The room is an eclectic range of outdated and contemporary styles and items; everything carries a thick layer of dust.

Aged by her illness, ALMA, sits in her armchair and takes a few deep breaths on her oxygen pump between drags on her electric cigarette.

The doorbell rings.

Pause.

ALMA sinks lower into her chair cautiously.

There is a knock at the front door.

Pause.

The doorbell rings twice.

ABIGAIL. (off) Hello? Miss Johnson? Are you there, Miss Johnson?

ALMA. If you're from the council then you can sod off!

ABIGAIL. This *is* the right address, isn't it? Alma Johnson?

ALMA. Who wants to know? 'Cause I'm not/ opening my door for just anyone off the street, you know, I'm not so stupid as some people are.

ABIGAIL. My name's Abigail, I'm your new homecare assistance, Miss Johnson. I'm a nurse at North Manchester General/ and following your recent operation I believe you require regular home visits to check –

ALMA. I'm not going back to the hospital. You can forget it.

ABIGAIL. I promise you Miss Johnson, this is simply a routine check-up. You've been receiving homecare since you were discharged, haven't you?

ALMA. What happened to the other girl?

ABIGAIL. I'm your new nurse now, Miss Johnson. And I have some identification, if you'd just like to open the door...

Pause.

ABIGAIL. Please, Miss Johnson, it is raining quite a bit out here.

ALMA. Door's open.

ABIGAIL. Pardon?

ALMA. It's not locked. You can come in.

ABIGAIL enters. She is soaking wet.

ABIGAIL. Do you think it's such a good idea to leave your front door unlocked like that, Miss Johnson?

ALMA. I'm sat right here. It's not like I'm going anywhere.

ABIGAIL. I guess...

ALMA. And there's nothing in here worth taking. In fact they'd be doing me a favour. I'd love someone to come in here and empty the place. Gives us a chance to get some new gear. Look at the telly, that's on its' last legs. Someone come and take it off my hands, please!

ALMA. Is that *Madame Butterfly* you're watching? Do you like opera?

ALMA. No, I've lost the remote.

ABIGAIL. Oh.

ALMA. You're wet.

ABIGAIL. It's raining.

ALMA. No brolly?

ABIGAIL. I forgot.

ALMA. You weren't prepared.

ABIGAIL. Could I take my coat off, maybe hang it somewhere?

ALMA. Might as well; if you're stopping.

ABIGAIL. Thanks.

ALMA. This music is doing my head in. I don't even know what channel this is on.../ Where is that bloody clicker-zapper got to? It was here just five minutes –

ABIGAIL. So I've brought your prescription. It's about time we replenished the stock. Now, you have been taking the pills, haven't you, Miss Johnson?

ALMA. Will you just call me Alma? I hate being called *Miss Johnson*, it makes me feel old. I'm not an old woman, you know, I'm not.

ABIGAIL. No –

ALMA. Just knackered. Like the telly.

ABIGAIL. How about I make you a cup of tea? It always makes for the best medicine in my opinion.

ALMA. Then you're a crap nurse.

ABIGAIL. Milk? Sugar? I'll sort these out for us, don't you get up.

ALMA. I wasn't going to.

ABIGAIL exits into the kitchen, off. ALMA continues to hunt around her for the remote.

The music shifts and is now being emitted from the record player again.

MICHAEL. What's it about?

ETHAN. *Madame Butterfly?*

MICHAEL. Yeah. What is it they're singing about?

ETHAN. The same thing every piece of art concerns itself with: love.

ABIGAIL. *(off)* Tea bags?

ALMA. In the pot frog by the kettle.

MICHAEL. And is she an actual butterfly?

ETHAN. (*smiling*) No, it's just a name. She's a young, naive Japanese girl who marries an American naval officer. They're from such different worlds. But she loves him. She loves him so much she changes her very faith and is subsequently cursed and renounced by her own family just to be a good and loving wife.

MICHAEL. And what does he do?

ETHAN. He goes back to America and marries another woman.

MICHAEL. Typical.

ETHAN. Men.

MICHAEL. So what happens to her?

ETHAN. She waits for him. For years she waits in her house and refuses to move on, to marry anyone else, determined that he is going to come back for her. And then she gets the news –

MICHAEL. He's dead? His new wife found out he was already married and killed the bastard.

ETHAN. Sadly not. She hears that he's coming back to Japan. Only then do we find out she gave birth to his child shortly after he left her all those years ago.

MICHAEL. No!

ETHAN. And when the American returns he brings his new wife who wants to raise the child herself with its father.

MICHAEL. Bitch.

ETHAN. When the American officer visits the house he can see from the special decorations she's covered the rooms in that she still loves him deeply and he can't face her. He cannot tell her the truth of the matter and leaves it to his wife and the other women to give her the news of them taking her child back to America.

MICHAEL. She doesn't let him though?

ETHAN. She says that he must come and take the child from her himself. That night she prays to her ancestors, says goodbye to her son and blindfolds him, leaving him to wait for his father.

MICHAEL. And does he come? Does he come back for the kid?

ETHAN. He does. But he's too late to save the girl.

MICHAEL. Why?

ETHAN. She kills herself. Cuts her own throat with her father's knife.

Pause.

MICHAEL. Silly cow. How could she let him do that to her?

ETHAN. She loved him.

MICHAEL. But... you wouldn't kill yourself over him, would you?

ETHAN. It's just your basic tragedy of unrequited love.

MICHAEL. I can't believe she could do it.

ETHAN. It's only a story.

MICHAEL. You would never do anything like that to me, would you?

ETHAN. Never. You're not a butterfly.

MICHAEL. Too right I'm not. *(kissing him)* So don't treat me like one.

ABIGAIL. *(off)* Sugar?

ALMA. One heaped.

MICHAEL. Come on.

He stands, taking ETHAN's hand, pulling him to his feet.

 Your suit is all damp.

Holding his hand, MICHAEL guides ETHAN toward the bedroom. ETHAN moves to turn the record player off but MICHAEL takes his other hand.

 Let it play.

They leave for the bedroom.

The music shifts again, now emitted from ALMA's television.

ABIGAIL returns with two cups of tea and places one down next to ALMA.

ABIGAIL. No luck?

ALMA. I could have sworn it was here not five minutes ago –

ABIGAIL. How was your New Year, Miss Johnson?

ALMA. Alma!

ABIGAIL. I'm sorry. Alma.

ALMA. That's a funny accent you've got.

ABIGAIL. Illinois by way of Peebles.

ALMA. So how've you ended up here?

ABIGAIL. Well... new year, new job; chance to start a new life.

ALMA. What happened to your old one?

ABIGAIL. (*looking out of the window*) Does it rain a lot here?

ALMA. Oh, it never rains.

ABIGAIL. Aha! Is this what you were looking for?

ABIGAIL retrieves the remote control from behind the chair.

ALMA. Thank Christ for that!

ALMA points the remote at the screen and clicks.

Blackout.

The sound of rain has faded to silence.

A flat in Leith, Edinburgh – Christmas Eve, 1967

In the darkness we hear ADAM's voice singing "Frosty the Snowman" by the Ronettes whilst ESTHER attempts to quieten him. A dim light. He is carrying a half-drunk bottle of cheap red wine. Both are wrapped up warm.

ADAM. "...was a holly-jolly soul, with his – something, something – and his...erm –"

ESTHER. (*whispering*) Button nose –

ADAM. Button nose!

ESTHER. Shhh! My roommate. You'll wake her up.

ADAM. What's she doing in bed at this time?

ESTHER. (*stifling laughter*) It's nearly midnight.

ADAM. Does she think Father Christmas won't come unless she sleeping?

ESTHER. You'll get me in so much trouble!

ADAM. Is she waiting for him to come down her chimney?

ESTHER. Shh!

ADAM. He'd have a job; she's got an electric fire.

The pair burst into a fit of uncontrollable giggles. ESTHER sits on the floor.

ADAM. What you doing down there, Rudolph?

ESTHER. I can't believe you made me drink so much!

ADAM. *(sitting also)* Look here, I wasn't forcing it down your neck –

ESTHER. I was trying to keep up with you! I'm not much of a drinker.

ADAM. You'd be no good at Christmas dinner with my lot.

ESTHER. I don't get drunk. I'm a good Jewish girl. Honest.

ADAM. Is that why you've been singing Christmas songs in the pub all night?

ESTHER. Well *you* don't really believe in the miracle of the "Immaculate Conception" do you? But you're more than willing to drink to it every December twenty-fifth *(hiccoughs)* Damn! Now look at me –

ADAM. Hold your breath. They'll go away. *(she does so)* And besides, we used to go church on Christmas, sometimes. And it's not as if you believe in any of that Jewish stuff anyway... Has it worked?

ESTHER let's out her breath and waits. She hiccoughs.

ESTHER. Damn!

ADAM. Do it again.

ESTHER. It doesn't work. And I'll have you know it doesn't matter what you believe in, if you're born Jewish (*hiccoughs*) then you're a Jew. And everything it comes with. (*hiccoughs*) There's no getting out of some things...

ADAM. It's my first Christmas not at home.

ESTHER. (*hiccoughs*) Damn it!

ADAM. Drink?

ESTHER. No, thank you. I need like a shock to the system, something. (*she continues to hiccough throughout*)

ADAM. Mum always makes sure she has parsnips. What a fuss – every year. We must have parsnips! Otherwise it's sacrilegious, according my mother. She couldn't give a toss any other time. Just that one sodding meal. And she would always make sure that Dad got the most parsnips; the *very* most. He loved parsnips, according to her. And they'd all get eaten. He'd never leave one. Never. Only one year, maybe '64, '65, I catch him out. I see him sneaking the parsnips off his plate and hiding them in his empty cracker. And he's see s me and knows I've spotted him and gives me this sly wink. And then he carries on. Thirty odd years they've been married and she doesn't know he hates parsnips. Can you figure that? She doesn't have a clue. It's laughable.

ESTHER. Nothing wrong with little secrets, (*hiccoughs*) it's the big ones that do the real damage. (*hiccoughs*)

ADAM. My dad, whenever he smiled, you know, he never showed his teeth. You'd catch him sometimes and he'd have this look in his eyes; like he

wasn't there, like he was a ghost. I think he'd rather be anywhere else than in that house. But he'd just... given up.

ESTHER. *(hiccoughs)* Damn! Sorry...

ADAM. And I remember thinking; I never want to be like that. I don't want to be stuck in that dead end life. Too many children, trapped in a job I hate and a wife who doesn't even know what vegetables I like!

ESTHER. Like I said, there's no escaping some things.

ADAM. You think that's all we have to look forward to?

ESTHER. What's the alternative?

ADAM. Freedom.

ESTHER. Loneliness.

ADAM. Not if you find the right person to share that freedom with?

ESTHER. I could live with that...

Pause.

ADAM. Your hiccoughs have stopped.

ESTHER. Wait... yes, they've gone! It's a Christmas miracle! *(hiccoughs)* Shit.

ADAM suddenly leans over and kisses ESTHER, abrupt then lingering.

ESTHER. What was that?

ADAM. A shock to the system.

ESTHER. Let's hope it works.

ADAM. If it doesn't we'll have to keep trying.

ESTHER. Will we?

ADAM. Maybe we should keep trying in your room?

ESTHER. I'm not that drunk.

ADAM. (*mock-dramatically*) You can't go on teasing me this way!

ESTHER. Shh!

ADAM. Don't force me to go back to that awful smelly boarding house!

ESTHER. Why shouldn't I?

ADAM. It's Christmas!

ESTHER. That is hardly an excuse to let you into my bed Mr Kennedy.

ADAM. But it'll be so cold, us being alone in separate beds. Makes much more sense to share one, keep each other warm...

ESTHER. I'm not buying it.

ADAM. Ah, fudge.

ESTHER. Oh, but wait there! Wait, wait, wait! That reminds me. Stay there!

She stands and makes her way off, to her bedroom. ADAM lies down on the floor, singing.

ADAM. "Frosty the snowman, was alive as he could be... " How does it go - ?
"Running here and there, all around the square, sayin' 'Catch me if you if
can!'"

ESTHER returns with a present wrapped in old tin-foil behind her back.

ESTHER. You can't sing.

ADAM. Neither can you but it doesn't stop you.

ESTHER. Shut up or you're not getting anything.

ADAM. What am I getting?

ESTHER. Close your eyes.

ADAM. If I do you can't punch me.

ESTHER. Why would I punch you?

ADAM. I have older sisters. I know the game.

ESTHER. Just close your eyes. I promise not to hit you.

ADAM. Fine.

He does so and ESTHER holds the gift out in front of him.

ESTHER. And... open them!

ADAM. You got me a present? But I didn't get you anything.

ESTHER. I'm Jewish. You can get me eight gifts at Hanukkah.

ADAM. Eight?

ESTHER. Just open it.

ADAM. *(whilst unwrapping)* You'd better not have spent any money on me.

ESTHER. Well? What do you think?

It is a large pad of cartridge paper, a few pencils and a box of pastels.

ADAM. What - ?

ESTHER. So you can try your hand at the art and do your landscapes like you said. You can draw the whole city. Like your friend, Lowry. What do you think?

ADAM. What if I'm shit?

ESTHER. Uh, what if you're not?

ADAM. I've not drawn anything since I was at school.

ESTHER. Exactly. About time you started again. It has to be better than working all the time and who knows...

ADAM. (*somewhat overwhelmed*) Thank you. Really. Best present I've ever had.

ESTHER. I think I could still top it.

ADAM. Hmm?

ESTHER. Come on. It's my first Christmas. I'm in that giving, festive mood.

She takes ADAM's hand and guides him off to her bedroom.

ESTHER. Merry Christmas, Adam.

ADAM. I think it will be.

She laughs at they leave.

ABIGAIL enters, dressed in her nursing uniform.

She speaks to us...

ABIGAIL. When I was a little girl my mother would always say that I was her little miracle. I imagine most parents say that sort of thing, entirely doting on their children. My mother was told she couldn't have kids when she was a younger woman so she never gave motherhood a second thought. Then I came along. She was a little older by this point and I think I shocked her quite a bit. Finding a person unexpectedly growing inside you can have that effect on you. But she always told me that it was the best surprise she ever had.

She'd always tell people I was her miraculous daughter, a gift that was *meant* to be. But there were so many things she never said, that I never asked when I had the chance. The subject of my father, for one rather significant example; he never came up in any conversation until she gave me the letter. It was from him, she told me on her deathbed. She said she hadn't opened it because it wasn't for her. But she felt terrible having never delivered it and instead she'd kept it in the back of her jumble drawer for the past twenty years. She admitted to me that she wasn't strong enough to face up to it and by that time she'd run out of chances. So I had to do it. I could tell it was difficult for her to talk about. Anything about fathers and she'd tighten up and stay deadly silent.

You can imagine my surprise when I see that same name on the envelope I had decided just days before to finally deliver. There goes the universe yelling my ear again. Johnson's a very common name, but Alma? I tremble just thinking of how this whole thing came into being.

I find myself asking more questions than I strictly ought to of a patient. We're not supposed to get too personal. But Alma's a lonely woman. I can tell. She has no visitors. She rarely mentions her family except for a sister who lives in Australia. And she seems to hate every person on her street. So naturally she keeps my visits longer by talking more and more about herself. And I listen. At least this way I can be sure I have the right person.

My Angel came back to me again last night, as I was sleeping.

I am doing the right thing, aren't I?

The house in Manchester –January 2013

ALMA is sat in her armchair, flicking through channels on the television whilst ABIGAIL kneels beside her to take her blood pressure. ABIGAIL picks up a small picture frame with an old photograph in it.

ABIGAIL. Who's this handsome guy?

ALMA. Michael. My son.

ABIGAIL. How old is he?

ALMA. That photo's from his twenty-first.

ABIGAIL. He looks good. He's a real testament to you, Alma.

ALMA. Got his looks from his father.

ABIGAIL. And does he visit you much?

ALMA. He's in Italy.

ABIGAIL. Well, that's nice.

ALMA. If you say so.

ABIGAIL. So is Michael's father still around or...?

ALMA. Are you always so nosey?

ABIGAIL. Sorry. I was just –

ALMA. Have you finished with my arm yet?

ABIGAIL. Sure. There's no change from last time, you're blood pressure's stable.

ALMA. Roll out the bunting. I'm still dying though right? The picture hasn't changed, has it?

ALMA begins taking drags on her electric cigarette.

ABIGAIL. You need to stay positive.

ALMA. (*drily*) Oh, I am. I'd be skipping up and down Rochdale Road if only my lungs and knees were up to it.

ABIGAIL. And that won't help you're blood pressure one bit.

ABIGAIL takes the electric cigarette off ALMA and puts it on the table.

ALMA. I miss the real thing. What time is it? Is that quiz show on yet?

ABIGAIL. *(suddenly alert)* Sorry, could I quickly use your bathroom?

ALMA. Again? You're like a leaky tap.

ABIGAIL rushes off upstairs to the bathroom. ALMA leans over to the table, which requires no small effort and visibly causes some pain. She retrieves her electric cigarette and smokes it.

MICHAEL enters from his kitchen, barefoot, carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses which he sets on the table. He pours a small measure for himself and sips, convulsing at the taste, he spits it back into the glass. Finding a cigarette he lights it and paces the room before reclining on the sofa.

ABIGAIL re-enters, wiping at her mouth. ALMA quickly tries to replace the electric cigarette on the table, accidentally knocking the photo of MICHAEL to the floor.

ABIGAIL. Sorry about that.

ALMA. You alright? You look a bit pale.

ABIGAIL. Do I?

ALMA. Have you just chucked up?

ABIGAIL. Uh, yeah, must be a bug.

ALMA. Great. Even my healthcare is sick an' all.

ABIGAIL. You dropped Michael on the floor. It's okay, the glass hasn't broken.

ALMA. Small mercies.

ABIGAIL. So what's Michael like?

ALMA. To be honest he was a terror growing up. From the word go. He screamed as a baby and he didn't stop until he were an adult. And even then... But I gave as good as got. We'd scream the house down. These rooms were a warzone; every day was a battle with him. It didn't take much to set him and off and then he'd be at me until he went bed. Honestly, he couldn't wait to get out from under me.

ABIGAIL. So was it just the two of you?

ALMA. His dad pissed off well before Michael was born. I don't know if that was part of the problem. And I never managed to keep a new fella with him around. Back then there weren't many blokes who'd want to go near a single mother and those who did Michael took a disliking to. He'd make sure they wouldn't stick around very long.

ABIGAIL. The boy could scare grown men away?

ALMA. He used to tell lies. Make horrible stories up about them, especially as he got older. He could make some very nasty insinuations about them and they'd soon be gone. I mean, who wants to live with that?

ABIGAIL. I guess.

ALMA. Michael always had a very vivid imagination.

MICHAEL sits up suddenly, as if he heard something strange. He stares up to the apartment above his and listens out for further noises. Eventually he stands on the sofa to try hearing better.

ALMA. If you want the truth that little bastard ruined my life.

ABIGAIL. You don't mean that.

ALMA. I do. I do mean that.

ABIGAIL. He's your son.

ALMA. (*worked up*) Not anymore he isn't.

ABIGAIL. Alma, don't say things like that.

ALMA. Why not? He isn't –

ABIGAIL. Don't upset yourself –

ALMA. He was never happy unless I was miserable –

ALMA suddenly convulses with pain, grasping at her stomach and groaning in agony.

ABIGAIL. Alma? What is it?

ALMA. It hurts.

ABIGAIL. Where? Show me.

ALMA. Just here, like a blinding pain.

ABIGAIL. Has this happened before?

ALMA. Now and then.

ABIGAIL. You just need to try and relax. Here, take this, big deep breaths.

She passes ALMA the handheld oxygen pump.

ALMA. I'm fine.

ABIGAIL. Alma.

ALMA. I told you, I'm fine. It comes and goes. I'm used to it now.

ABIGAIL. Nevertheless.

ALMA. Don't stay any longer than you've got to. I'll be alright.

ABIGAIL. And what if you aren't?

ALMA. I can't be the only sick old woman they've got you visiting.

ABIGAIL. You said you weren't old.

ALMA. And you spend more time here than any of my other nurses have.

ABIGAIL. I like to do the job properly.

ALMA. And you stay longer every time you come.

ABIGAIL. I must like you.

ALMA. Well I'm sorry love but I just don't swing that way. I don't *swing* any way these days. Now there's something I miss.

ABIGAIL. Then I guess I'll be leaving now. Are you sure you're okay, the pain's gone?

ALMA. It never goes but it's much more bearable now. Thanks.

ABIGAIL puts on her coat, preparing to leave. She pauses briefly and turning back she produces a pen and writes on the back of an old receipt.

ABIGAIL. Listen, Alma, I'm going to give you my personal number, okay? And you can ring me any time, day or night. It'll be faster than using that helpline they gave you. Don't hesitate to call me, understand? It's not like you'll be dragging me away from a thriving social life so you just call me, okay?

ALMA. This in your job description, is it?

ABIGAIL. I'm your nurse. I want to be there for you.

ALMA. If you say so.

ABIGAIL. Promise you'll call?

ALMA. I guess.

ABIGAIL. Alma?

ALMA. I promise. Now sod off and I can watch my quiz.

ABIGAIL. Goodbye, Alma. Don't lose that number.

ABIGAIL smiles as she leaves. ALMA sits staring at the phone number for a moment.

The sound of keys in the door.

The apartment in Giudecca – March 1991

Hearing the keys, MICHAEL rushes into the kitchen to fetch his home-made dinner.

MICHAEL. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit!

ETHAN enters as MICHAEL hurries back into the room with two plates of food.

MICHAEL. You're early.

ETHAN. I'm sorry. I couldn't stay away a moment longer.

MICHAEL. Wine?

ETHAN. Please. You've been cooking.

MICHAEL. Experimenting.

ETHAN. Will the miracles never end?

MICHAEL. *(pouring a glass)* Sit.

ETHAN. You opened the good stuff.

MICHAEL. Did I?

ETHAN. Can't even find this sort of thing back in Britain.

MICHAEL. Can't imagine why.

They chink glasses and sip. MICHAEL hides his distaste.

ETHAN. And what are we calling this dish?

MICHAEL. I don't know. "Johnson Surprise"?

ETHAN. Smells interesting.

ETHAN takes a spoonful and eats. It is putrid. He tries to hide his distaste.

MICHAEL. Well?

ETHAN. Interesting.

MICHAEL. Yeah, I don't do much cooking.

ETHAN. Plenty of time to learn.

MICHAEL. I hate food.

ETHAN. Is this the culmination of your day then?

MICHAEL. If you're asking whether I've been out today then no.

ETHAN. You'll need to do it someday soon. The locals won't bite.

MICHAEL. Don't speak Italian like you, do I?

ETHAN. I only speak a little for work. I do live here.

MICHAEL. I live here too!

ETHAN. I know. I know that Michael.

Pause.

MICHAEL. I did find something interesting today actually.

ETHAN. What's that?

MICHAEL produces an old photo from under a cushion.

MICHAEL. Have a look. This photo was in one of the drawers in the sideboard. It's so weird, look, this guy looks just like you, wearing your white suit and everything, but the photo is too old. I think he's standing by the canal outside. See?

ETHAN. It must be Tobias.

MICHAEL. Who?

ETHAN. My Uncle Tobias. It looks like this could be from the sixties maybe. This was one of his nicer properties. You know he owned a few apartments on the island; used to rent them out to holidaymakers for years but when he got older he sold them all off and moved in here by himself.

MICHAEL. He's the spitting image of you.

ETHAN. He must be the same age as me in this photo.

MICHAEL. Same taste in white suits too.

ETHAN. He was, what they used to call, a "confirmed bachelor".

MICHAEL. He was bent?

ETHAN. It was never broadcast. We're not too close in our family; mainly because we're so spread out. I guarantee you'll find one of us in every city from here to Reykjavik. Like a hoard of rats; the plague of Europe.

When Uncle Toby got ill he warned mother he was leaving this place to us.

MICHAEL. He didn't die in here did he?

ETHAN. No. He went into hospital but none of the family was able to make it down in time. He died alone.

MICHAEL. Poor Uncle Toby.

ETHAN. I suppose that's the risk of staying a confirmed bachelor as you get older; less people to take care of you.

MICHAEL. I'm glad he didn't die in here.

ETHAN. And look at him here, smiling away. He'd no idea... (*lost in thought*)

MICHAEL. Those people upstairs have been making funny noises again.

ETHAN. Hmm?

MICHAEL. Dragging stuff round the floor all day.

ETHAN. Perhaps they're moving the furniture.

MICHAEL. I don't trust them. It doesn't sound normal.

ETHAN. And what does normal sound like, exactly?

MICHAEL. It's all very, what's that word?

ETHAN. Imagined?

MICHAEL. Suspicious.

ETHAN. You need to get out of this apartment.

MICHAEL. If I could just see through the ceiling...

ETHAN. Have you heard yourself?

MICHAEL. I'm not making it up.

ETHAN. Of course you're not.

MICHAEL. Fine. You don't have to believe me. I know what I heard. *(taking the photo of Tobias)* You really do look like him. Don't you?

ETHAN. *(distant)* The spitting image.

MICHAEL wanders off into the bedroom. After a moment, ETHAN stands with his glass and takes up the bottle, pouring himself a new glass as he slowly follows off.

ADAM enters, he wears an stained apron round his waist.

The café in Edinburgh – April 1968

From outside comes the sound of heavy rainfall.

ADAM sits at a table and takes out a pen and paper. He writes two words at the top of a page and stops, unable to continue. Whilst he is staring at the paper, ESTHER enters, carrying with her an umbrella and a framed landscape sketch.

ESTHER. Look: your first masterpiece, signed and framed.

He quickly scrunches up the paper he was writing on and pockets it.

ADAM. When did you do this?

ESTHER. I got it done this morning on way to the library. Picked it up on the way here. You like? Professional. With your initials in the corner, see? I still can't quite believe your middle name is Rupert.

ADAM. After my Grandad.

ESTHER. But do you like it?

ADAM. How much did it cost you?

ESTHER. Never mind about that. I thought if you didn't want to keep it then we could always try selling it. That professor I know is a huge fan of this kind of thing – a real collector.

ADAM. You reckon somebody would pay for it?

ESTHER. Absolutely. It's fantastic Even the guy in the shop said so. Where did you get this view, was it that hill – ?

ADAM. Calton Hill.

ESTHER. You make the city look so beautiful.

ADAM. I didn't have to try very hard.

ESTHER. Are you doing a couple of sketches now?

ADAM. Hmm?

ESTHER. The paper...?

ADAM. Oh. Yeah I was just having a practice. Insides are always harder to do than outsides I find. It's the dimensions.

ESTHER. What about people?

ADAM. What about them?

ESTHER. Would you ever sketch a person, like a live model?

ADAM. I've never tried before. Probably not.

ESTHER. Even with such a beautiful muse?

ADAM. And who would that be?

ESTHER. You're a charmer. I'll have a black coffee.

ADAM. I'm on my break.

ESTHER. You're a million miles away.

ADAM. Am I?

ESTHER. It's like you're not even here. Something on your mind?

ADAM. Nothing.

ESTHER. You'd tell me if there was?

ADAM. Sure.

Pause.

ESTHER. I wonder how much you could get for these pictures...

ADAM. Not much.

ESTHER. You'd be surprised. You could make a fortune.

ADAM. We could go travelling, like you said. See more of Europe.

ESTHER. More landscapes to capture.

ADAM. More old buildings for you to drool over.

ESTHER. Paris? Barcelona? Rome. Venice!

ADAM. Whatever you want.

ESTHER. Well right now I want a coffee, black. Please.

ADAM. Do I get a tip?

ESTHER. Don't eat yellow snow.

ADAM. Why?

ESTHER. Coffee, black, go.

ADAM stuffs the paper and pen back into his apron pocket and wanders off, still distant.

The sound of heavy rainfall continues...

The house in Manchester – March 2013

It is late at night. ALMA is sat in her armchair in front of the television. The sound of keys in the door. ABIGAIL enters, soaking wet and out of breath.

ABIGAIL. Alma? What is it? Is everything okay?

ALMA. What are you doing here? It's the middle of the night.

ABIGAIL. You rang me. Half an hour ago. Remember? You said you were in pain, that you needed me to come round straight away. Alma?

ALMA. Did I...?

ABIGAIL. Half an hour ago.

ALMA. Help yourself to a brew or whatever.

ABIGAIL. Have you taken your pills?

ALMA. Who are you, my mother?

ABIGAIL. Have you seen the rain?

ALMA. You need a brolly.

ABIGAIL. I'll put the kettle on. *(leaves for the kitchen)*

ALMA. Two sugars for me, I'm off the wagon.

ABIGAIL. *(off)* Well you're definitely off.

ALMA produces a small tobacco tin and takes a joint from it and proceeds to light it.

MICHAEL enters from his kitchen, carrying a glass of wine. He wears a new silk kimono of his own; it is a deep blue with an embossed floral green design.

ABIGAIL. (re-entering) Alma, are you out milk? I can't find any – (halts) what the hell do you think you're doing?

ALMA. Chill out.

ABIGAIL. Is that what I think it is?

ALMA. No, it's a diamond encrusted elephant.

ABIGAIL. How long have you been smoking this? Where did you even get it?

ALMA. This coloured lad; I forget his name – lives round the corner. I used to know his mum. Nice enough boy. He sells it. Said it would help me with my pains. I tell you, he's not wrong. He give us a discount too, rolled a couple up for me, the lot.

ABIGAIL. You have painkillers.

ALMA. Yeah, well, the drugs don't work, love. I prefer this.

ABIGAIL. It'll rot your brains.

ALMA. I've none left. And I've read about this all online. They give it out as medicine nowadays; you can get it on prescription even.

ABIGAIL. You don't even remember calling me.

ALMA. I do.

ABIGAIL. But you said –

ALMA. You said I could ring you any time, day or night. You said so.

ABIGAIL. If it was an emergency, if you *needed* me.

Pause.

ABIGAIL. Alma?

ALMA. You're right. Sorry I troubled you. Go if you want.

ABIGAIL. I can stay for a while.

ALMA. No. I shouldn't have made you come/ all this way –

ABIGAIL. Don't worry, that's why I gave you/ my number so –

ALMA. It was daft of me.

ABIGAIL. No. I can stay.

Pause. ABIGAIL sits.

ALMA. Thank you.

Hold on this...

The apartment in Giudecca – April 1991

It is the evening.

ETHAN enters carrying a cake covered in lit candles.

ETHAN. *"Tanti auguri a-te,
tanti auguri a-te,
tanti auguri Micheletto!
Tanti auguri a-te!"*

MICHAEL applauds as ETHAN sets the cake down.

MICHAEL. You bought me a cake!?

ETHAN. I *made* you a cake. Now you make a wish.

MICHAEL. But when did you make this?

ETHAN. Blow out your candles before the wax gets all over the icing.

MICHAEL kisses him; it is prolonged and grateful. He blows out the candles.

ETHAN. Do you like your present?

MICHAEL. Love it. Now we'll match at bedtime. Not long before we'll have "him and his" slippers. We're going to be so naff.

ETHAN. The naffest!

MICHAEL. Might as well. I'm old now.

ETHAN. If you're old then what am I?

MICHAEL. Ancient!

ETHAN. Thank you *so* much. Would you like a slice?

MICHAEL. Is it jam-sponge?

ETHAN. Carrot.

MICHAEL. You what?

ETHAN. It's a carrot cake. A recipe from my mother.

MICHAEL. I'm not being funny Ethan but who puts vegetables in a cake?

ETHAN. You might like it.

MICHAEL. That's like having broccoli/ ice cream or, I don't know...

ETHAN. You could at least try some –

MICHAEL. You wouldn't have a cabbage cake, would you? (*starting to laugh*) It's just the thought of it is, you know...

ETHAN. I did make it for you.

MICHAEL. I didn't ask you to.

ETHAN. At least I'll know next time.

He stands and takes the cake back into the kitchen. MICHAEL smokes a cigarette.

ALMA. I missed out on all this the first time round.

ABIGAIL. Smoking pot?

ALMA. Adam used to smoke it sometimes with his mates.

ABIGAIL. Adam?

ALMA. Michael's dad. He only smoked it sometimes, mind; more to fit in than anything else I think 'cause he didn't even smoke normal cigarettes on account of this asthma.

ABIGAIL. Michael's dad was called Adam?

ALMA. Yeah. We grew up together, lived in the same street, not far from here.

ABIGAIL. Adam?

ALMA. Something wrong with your ears?

ABIGAIL. Sorry. You said he left before Michael was born?

ALMA. It scared him off; terrified him, the thought of being a dad. We'd been stupid but lucky for years. We were each other's firsts. First snog, first couple, first everything. At that age your first love feels like it'll last

forever. And it looked like it might've lasted. Then when I told him I was pregnant I saw that little love he'd held on to all that time fade from his eyes. I can still see it now.

ABIGAIL. He just left?

ALMA. He ran. Couldn't see him for dust. He was never happy here, I realised that. And I don't blame him. Adam wanted out of here; out of his job that he hated, out from under his parents feet, out from everything. And I gave him just the excuse he needed to get him going.

ABIGAIL. But you stayed?

ALMA. I had a son.

ABIGAIL. And you let him leave?

ALMA. How could I make him stay? It wouldn't have made either of us happy.

ABIGAIL. But what about Michael?

ALMA. Plenty of boys grow up without their daddies.

ABIGAIL. I'm sure Adam had his reasons.

ALMA. Michael ended up taking after him anyway. He pissed off too.

MICHAEL. Ethan? I'm sorry, Ethan. Sorry I don't like your cake. Ethan? It was a nice thought. Ethan?

MICHAEL follows off into the kitchen.

ABIGAIL. Does he ever come back, Michael?

ALMA. I've been to visit him, once.

ABIGAIL. *(abruptly)* Sorry, but can I use your bathroom?

ALMA. Knock yourself out.

ETHAN returns with a fresh glass of wine, followed by MICHAEL.

MICHAEL. What were you doing when you turned twenty-three, or are the seventies just a blur for you?

ETHAN. I was engaged, actually.

MICHAEL. Fuck off you weren't.

ETHAN. To a woman.

MICHAEL. Why?

ETHAN. I was in love.

MICHAEL. And you've never told me until now because...?

ETHAN. Nothing came of it.

MICHAEL. I don't understand.

ETHAN. It was what I wanted. I wanted to settle down and start a family. I thought that would make me happy. I come from a big family. It's what we do; we multiply and divide all over the place. But in the end, I couldn't lie to myself, or her, and I just had to give up on that dream.

MICHAEL. You really wanted kids and the wife and all that stuff at twenty-three?

ETHAN. A family of my own? Certainly.

MICHAEL. I can't see it as appealing myself.

ETHAN. What else are we here for? I thought that was the point.

MICHAEL. Of what?

ETHAN. Everything. I always believed we are here to leave something of ourselves behind once we're gone. You build from what you're given so you can make something that lasts. With children, that's what you're doing. It's like this city, like Venice. It had to start with someone. You don't remember the names of the men who cemented the bricks but you can see what they left behind. We're standing in it. It lasted. The city will be stand for years and years and years, outliving everyone who visits or lives here, thanks to those who made it possible. That's what I think we're here for. To build a legacy which will go on living for us and in some small way we can never be forgotten.

MICHAEL. What if it sinks? What if Venice sank?

ETHAN. Better to have built something than nothing.

MICHAEL. Nothing lasts. You see?

ETHAN. This too shall pass.

MICHAEL. It's funny thinking of you as a dad.

ETHAN. Why?

MICHAEL. I don't know. But I can see it.

ETHAN. I have one more present for you.

MICHAEL. Another one?

ETHAN. I couldn't resist. Un momento por favore.

ETHAN heads off into the bedroom.

ABIGAIL returns from the bathroom.

ABIGAIL. That stuff'll stink your house out. I could smell it from upstairs.

ALMA. I can't tempt you?

ABIGAIL. Not even a little bit.

ALMA. Probably for the best. You don't want it to damage the baby.

Pause.

ABIGAIL. What?

ALMA. What?

ABIGAIL. What did you say? Damage the...?

ALMA. Baby.

ABIGAIL. You must be high.

ALMA. I might be, but I'm not stupid.

ABIGAIL. How did you know?

ALMA. I must be psychic. You'll not be able to hide it much longer. How far gone are you, three months?

ABIGAIL. Nearly four.

ALMA. And they don't know at the hospital?

ABIGAIL. I've just started the job.

ALMA. Then why did you take it? (*No reply*) Why move here at all if you've just found out you're in the club?

MICHAEL. Can't you find it?

ETHAN. (*off*) Un momento, Michelotto!

ABIGAIL. I should go.

ALMA. Stay.

ABIGAIL. I'm sorry, I really should –

ALMA. I want you to stay.

ABIGAIL. Well, I can probably wait another five minutes until the bus –

ALMA. No, I mean I want you to stay. I want you to stay here. Move in.

ABIGAIL. Alma, I couldn't. You're my patient. I could lose my job.

ALMA. You won't be working for much longer anyway.

ABIGAIL. No.

ALMA. I'm sitting in this house all the time to myself and I'm thinking of you in that pokey room they've stuffed you in and you're miles from home. It makes sense. We're the same. We've got nobody else who gives a shit, have we? Where's that baby's father, eh? Back in Scotland, is he?

ABIGAIL. He doesn't know.

ALMA. That's your business. All I know is you can't do this alone, believe me.

ABIGAIL. I don't know what to do.

ALMA. You can start by brewing up.

ABIGAIL head off into the kitchen.

ETHAN returns with a hastily wrapped gift.

ETHAN. I'd not wrapped it yet.

MICHAEL. Then why wrap it now? I'm only going to rip it off again.

ETHAN. Presents must always be wrapped.

He gives MICHAEL the present. It's an Italian phrasebook.

ETHAN. I thought this might come in more useful than a dressing gown.

MICHAEL. "Teach Yourself Italian" very clever...

ETHAN. It was that or swimming lessons.

MICHAEL. You take the piss.

ETHAN. Or cooking class.

An envelope falls from between the pages of the book.

MICHAEL. What's this?

ETHAN. It arrived this morning.

MICHAEL opens the envelope. It's a birthday card. He reads it.

MICHAEL. How did she know your address?

ETHAN. What does it say?

MICHAEL. When did you talk to her?

ETHAN. Don't be angry, Michael.

MICHAEL. When?

ETHAN. I rang her the day you came, before you landed.

MICHAEL. How dare you?

ETHAN. Look, she's sent you money. You know she/ still cares about you.

MICHAEL. I don't want anything from her. I can't believe you'd go behind my back to her like that. I can't believe you'd lie to me all this time, she still knows exactly where I am –

ETHAN. She's your mother; she has a right to know where you've gone.

MICHAEL. No she doesn't! She has *no* right. She just wants to keep her beady fucking eye on me, even now, even here. Just one more birthday she's ruined for me thanks to you. You knew I didn't want her knowing I was coming here, you knew!

ETHAN. I didn't want to her to worry about you.

MICHAEL. You're as bad as she is!

ETHAN. You just walked out on her.

MICHAEL. She *drove* me out! I couldn't stay in that/ house a second longer!

ETHAN. Whatever she did you can forgive her, surely?

MICHAEL. You've no idea...

ETHAN. I'm sorry.

MICHAEL. It just comes so easy to you, doesn't it? Lying to my face all this time.

ETHAN. Not at all.

MICHAEL. You've always been good at lying. And cheating. He didn't know about me for months, your last fella, did he? Not a clue.

ETHAN. It's not the same –

MICHAEL. I have absolutely no reason to trust you.

ETHAN. I would never –

MICHAEL. I'm going to bed. You can sleep on the sofa.

ETHAN. Michael...

MICHAEL. 'Night.

MICHAEL goes into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him. ETHAN stands, defeated.

ABIGAIL emerges from the kitchen.

ABIGAIL. I'd have to leave some things in my room and go back now and then; make them think I'm still sleeping there.

ALMA. That'd work.

ABIGAIL. Would it? No. I can't do it.

ALMA. You can. You have to.

ABIGAIL. I couldn't let you.

ALMA. You'd be helping me. I'd have full access to my own nurse. You don't have to pay rent or anything like that, honest.

ABIGAIL. You're making it hard to turn you down.

ALMA. I don't want to be on my own, not anymore. You know, just in case.

ABIGAIL. Alma...

ALMA. It's up to you, love.

ALMA rises with some difficulty from her chair and makes to go upstairs.

ABIGAIL watches her leave then stands for a moment, lost. Finally she follows ALMA off.

The sound of rain fades...

The apartment in Giudecca – June 1971/1991

Compared to the sweltering heat outside, the room is cool and calm. We hear voices from behind the door and keys jostling in the lock. MICHAEL enters from the bedroom, wearing his kimono, and stares at the door. Nervously, he removes the framed sketch from the wall and holds it up as a weapon, ready to strike. Eventually it opens and in walks ADAM and ESTHER with a suitcase each.

No reaction from MICHAEL. He slowly puts the picture down and begins pacing.

The sound of Italian folk music and singing is heard from the street.

ADAM. At last.

ESTHER. Oh. I like this place. Very authentic... rustic.

ADAM. Do you mean cheap?

ESTHER. It's perfect.

MICHAEL moves to the now closed door and puts his ear against the wood, listening.

ADAM takes both suitcases and carries them into the bedroom whilst ESTHER moves about the room, taking in her new surroundings, before moving to the window.

ADAM. (off) Nice big bed in here.

ESTHER. It's so hot out there, makes a nice change to be cool. Not as much of a view as I was hoping for...

ADAM. (returning) Well Doctor Stone; are we happy?

ESTHER. Can I ask – why Venice?

ADAM. Why not? It's meant to be romantic. Like in films. And I wanted to see if they have them boats that've got men in with them sticks.

ESTHER. Gondoliers?

ADAM. We should get one of them!

ESTHER. Can I unpack first?

ADAM. Do it later.

ESTHER. You should unpack too.

ADAM. Never flown before. It takes it out of you, doesn't it?

ESTHER. Try going transatlantic.

ADAM. Is that an offer?

ESTHER. *(pause)* I'm gonna need a shower. It's so hot.

ADAM. I'm sorry.

ESTHER. That's okay, it's not like *you* control the weather. Or is there something you're not telling me?

ADAM. Shut up. Listen, I know it's taken us forever to take this holiday and –

ESTHER. And we're here now. And I'm thrilled, you have no idea.

They kiss – long and heartfelt. MICHAEL leaves the door and begins pacing the room, becoming increasingly more erratic, as if searching for something, but to no avail.

ADAM pulls away and flops onto the sofa.

ADAM. You're right. I've never been so hot. You fancy fetching us a water?

ESTHER. Anything else I can get for you, *sir*?

ADAM. *(reclining)* Nah. Water'll be fine.

ESTHER grins at ADAM as she walks off into the kitchen. ADAM smiles, eyes closed.

There are tears of frustration forming in MICHAEL's eyes as his searching proves futile. He sits on the floor by the sofa, knees up to his face, gasping for air as he tries to stop himself weeping.

MICHAEL lets out a loud sob. ADAM sits up. He looks about the room but can see nothing there. We hear running water from the kitchen. ADAM removes his shirt and lies down, placing the shirt over his head.

ESTHER returns from the kitchen with a glass of water. She stands over ADAM, watching him resting. Smiling, she tilts the glass over his stomach and pours a dribble of cold water onto his bare torso. ADAM immediately jumps up with a yelp. ESTHER laughs whilst trying to out-run ADAM, who chases her into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

At the sound of the door, MICHAEL jumps up and moves to the window. He finds a cigarette on the sill which he lights and smokes, calming himself. He picks up the framed sketch and stares at it.

MICHAEL. I must be going mad. What do you think?

There is laughter from the bedroom. MICHAEL turns to listen. A key is turning in the lock of the front door. ETHAN enters. In a blind panic MICHAEL turns back and hurls the picture at him, missing him by inches and smashing on the wall. ETHAN stands in shock.

Pause.

ETHAN. Honey, I'm home.

MICHAEL. *(quietly)* Fuck off.

ETHAN. And how was your day?

MICHAEL. I thought you were...

ETHAN. What? You thought I was what; the Bogeyman? Aren't you a bit old/
for that sort of thing?

MICHAEL. I don't know. *(pause)* I've just made a fresh lot of coffee.

ETHAN. Wonderful.

MICHAEL. Help yourself.

ETHAN. I'd prefer a brandy.

MICHAEL. I made it for you, for when you got home.

ETHAN. I don't fancy it.

MICHAEL. I made it special. *(pause)* One cup?

ETHAN. I suppose –

MICHAEL. I can take that *(almost snatching ETHAN's briefcase away from him)* –

ETHAN. Would you like a cup?

MICHAEL. No. I've had nine.

ETHAN. No wonder you're jumping off the walls.

After checking ETHAN is out of sight, MICHAEL tries to unlock the briefcase but cannot. He soon becomes frustrated again, banging his fists on the case and snarling. ETHAN returns holding a cup of steaming coffee and stares at MICHAEL.

ETHAN. What are you doing?

MICHAEL. You've changed the code on your briefcase.

ETHAN. It's always been the same.

MICHAEL. Then why isn't it working?

ETHAN. Why do you need to open my briefcase?

MICHAEL. You told me the code was my birthday.

ETHAN. Michael, I didn't – (*he steps closer*)

MICHAEL. You told me.

ETHAN. I never said that –

MICHAEL. Liar.

ETHAN. Stop it Michael. (*closer*)

MICHAEL. I saw you.

ETHAN. When?

MICHAEL. At breakfast.

ETHAN. You saw me what?

MICHAEL. With that letter. Admit it.

ETHAN. I get lots of letters.

MICHAEL. I know you do. You're so in demand, aren't you Ethan?

ETHAN. I'll not talking to you when you're like this. (*back to kitchen*)

MICHAEL. (*with increasing volume*) You were reading a letter this morning and when you saw me you hid it in your briefcase and ran off to work. I saw you! And now you've changed the code so I can't open this fucking thing because you don't trust me and you're a huge fucking liar and I'm sick of the whole fucking thing!

Pause.

ETHAN. (*returning*) Have you quite finished?

MICHAEL. (*quietly*) Is it him? Is he writing to you?

ETHAN. How could you ask –

MICHAEL. Don't lie to me. I couldn't bare it if you lied. I'd die. I would.

ETHAN. Michael –

MICHAEL. *(smiling)* Does he beg? Does he beg you to go back? 'Cause his tragic little life is so fucking terrible without you... *(laughing)* well? I want to know what he says to you. Should be good for a laugh, shouldn't it? Open it. Please. I have to know what he says to you. Please. Open it. Ethan. Show me. *(hysterical)* Show me!

Long pause. We hear more laughter from the bedroom. MICHAEL's face is full of tears.

MICHAEL. All I could think about. All day. I tried not to. Please. Open it.

ETHAN. You have to stop hiding yourself away up here every day. It isn't good for you; can't you see that?

MICHAEL. Just open it.

ETHAN sits beside MICHAEL who watches intently as he unlocks the briefcase and extracts the letter. MICHAEL snatches it from him and reads.

MICHAEL. I don't understand.

ETHAN. It's from my cousins in Prague. They're English isn't very good.

MICHAEL. This is what you were reading at breakfast?

ETHAN. Yes.

MICHAEL. Then why did you have to hide it from me?

ETHAN. I really wasn't. They're setting up a new business but they haven't got a clue what they're doing and they wanted to ask for my help. Must've got this address from mother. She could have just given them my

phone number. It would have been much simpler and this whole fiasco could've been avoided. Happy?

MICHAEL. You've no idea.

ETHAN. If we're done with today's hysterics then I think I'll sack the coffee and have that brandy now. This is what I'm talking about. I go out and come back to find you've been fretting over nothing all day. It's like the people upstairs all over again.

MICHAEL. You don't know. They could still be hiding bodies up there.

ETHAN. I think we might have smelt a corpse in this heat. Brandy?

MICHAEL. Large.

Once ETHAN vanishes into the kitchen, MICHAEL begins hunting in the briefcase for any other incriminating evidence, scanning letters, documents and work files, finding nothing.

ESTHER emerges from the bedroom barely clothed. She produces a packet of expensive cigarettes, takes one out and lights it with matches and stands by the window. ADAM enters from the bedroom in nothing but his underpants.

ADAM. What are you doing?

ESTHER. Smoking.

ADAM. You don't smoke.

ESTHER. I bought a pack at the airport. I don't smoke in Scotland. It's a filthy habit in a cold country. But not here. I've decided; I shall only smoke in Venice.

ADAM. Makes you look glamorous.

ESTHER. Good. That's what I was going for. Like in films. Though I'm not very good at it. Not sure I even like the damn things. Although I noticed when we were talking to the owner he was smoking the same brand and I thought: well, I must have good taste.

ADAM. How d'you make that out?

ESTHER. Don't you think he was ever so suave? So sophisticated. In that white linen suit. A real European gentlemen. Just what I expected in Venice.

ADAM. Looked a bit of a ponce to me. What were his name again?

ESTHER. Tobias. Like the saint. He had a kind smile.

ADAM. He weren't even Italian. Just tanned.

ESTHER. I wouldn't be jealous if I were you, dear.

ADAM. As if. Old enough to be your dad!

ETHAN. *(off)* Looks like we've drank the cheap stuff. I'll open this fancy bottle.

ESTHER. I don't think *I'm* his type, if you follow.

ADAM. What you talkin' about?

ESTHER. Though he may have been giving you the eye.

ADAM. What – you saying he was bent? Reckon he were looking at *me*?

ESTHER. *(smirking)* And who could blame him? Such a handsome –

ADAM. Knocks me sick.

ESTHER. Pardon?

Having found nothing, MICHAEL begins searching through ETHAN's personal phonebook.

ADAM. All that queer stuff.

ESTHER. Don't be like that.

ADAM. Like what?

ESTHER. Small minded, Adam. Ignorant.

ADAM. Don't call me ignorant. I'm not fucking ignorant.

ESTHER. Just a little backward.

ADAM. Bollocks!

ESTHER. It is legal now, did you hear?

ADAM. Don't make me feel stupid for not loving puffs like you do.

MICHAEL picks up ETHAN's mobile phone and tries dialling the number he's found.

ESTHER. What about my roommate, Sarah?

ADAM. That's different.

ESTHER. You didn't have a problem with her being homosexual.

ADAM. Don't use that word. Making it sound all proper and correct.

ESTHER. Sometimes I forget who you are. What you are.

ADAM. And what am I exactly?

ESTHER. Forget it.

ETHAN returns from the kitchen with filled brandy glasses, unnoticed by MICHAEL.

ADAM. Oh yes, let's not forget I'm still backstreet, pig-ignorant scum, aren't I?

ESTHER. We're not married. We don't do arguing. Remember that?

She walks heavily back into the bedroom.

ADAM. / ETHAN. What are you doing?

ESTHER. Unpacking.

Pause.

MICHAEL. You still have his number. I just want to give him a call.

ETHAN. No you're not.

MICHAEL. It might cost you. Can we get England on this?

ETHAN. Put it down.

MICHAEL. I want to hear it from him.

ETHAN. My word should be enough.

Pause. ADAM moves over to the bedroom door.

ADAM. Shall we go out tonight?

ESTHER. We can do that.

ETHAN goes to MICHAEL and reaches to take back his phone but is prevented.

ADAM. Nothing fancy.

ETHAN. Please, Michael?

MICHAEL. I think it's ringing –

ETHAN. Stop being ridiculous!

MICHAEL. Sorry, I can't help it. I'm just such a ridiculous prat, me!

ETHAN. Please.

MICHAEL stands and walks about the room still glued to the phone.

ADAM. Bet they've got good plonk here too.

ESTHER. You mean the wine?

ADAM. Yeah. You'll enjoy that, right? Good wine.

ESTHER. You know I'm not much of a drinker...

ADAM laughs intently. ETHAN grapples with MICHAEL for the phone.

ETHAN. Just give it back –

MICHAEL. Scared of what I'll found out?

ETHAN. Michael, stop –

MICHAEL. You must think I'm such an idiot! *(to phone)* Hello? Helloooo? Ciao! – it's the answering machine I think – Mikey Johnson here. Just wanted to ask if you'd been sending my man any love letters? 'cause if you have, would you please stop as he's not even the slightest bit interested in your fat saggy old cock, okay? So you can stop trying to win him back because I am telling you now –

ETHAN. Give me the phone Michael, you're making a fool out of yourself!

MICHAEL. I'm not making a fool out of myself, *(into phone)* am I? No. Ethan doesn't seem to understand that I have to sit in this pokey flat, day after day – while he swans off to meet his so called "clients" and leaves me here while/ he's doing god-knows-what with every filthy local –

ETHAN. I understand well enough how insecure/ you might be feeling –

MICHAEL. Oh! Did you hear that? He *does* understand! So old/ and wise, isn't he?

ETHAN. But you have to –

MICHAEL. Sensible, cultured, boring, cheating old Ethan!

ETHAN. Hang up!

MICHAEL. Don't you find he can be so high and mighty with his operas and his languages and his cousins in Prague – he can be so, what's that word?

ETHAN. Patient?

MICHAEL. Condescending. He is a condescending cunt.

ETHAN. For Christ's sake! Will you/ stop acting like a child –

MICHAEL. You're probably better off without him to be honest!

ETHAN. Give – the phone – to me – now

He makes a leap for the phone but MICHAEL pushes him back across the room, they halt and stare at one another. MICHAEL still has his ear to the phone, listening.

ADAM. Is the food be gonna be funny here?

ESTHER. You think the ravioli will be cracking jokes at the table?

ADAM. I mean, will I like it?

ESTHER. I've seen you eat haggis. I'm sure you'll manage.

MICHAEL. I think the line's gone dead.

ADAM. It really is a beautiful city.

ESTHER. Will you be taking full artistic advantage of the landscape here too?

ADAM. When in Rome. Or Venice more like.

ESTHER appears from the bedroom, towel in hand.

ADAM. Or maybe I could finally take full artistic advantage of my real muse.

ESTHER. You mean it?

ADAM. When in Venice.

The pair half smile at one another. ADAM goes in to kiss ESTHER but she turns her cheek to him. He softly pecks it once.

ETHAN. Give it back to me.

MICHAEL. Why?

ETHAN. Michael –

ETHAN swiftly crosses the room, making a leap for the phone. MICHAEL refuses, holding the phone at arms' length, pushing ETHAN's face back. The struggle becomes more violent.

MICHAEL. Fuck off – I swear – I will – kill –

ETHAN. Michael! Stop –

MICHAEL. 'OFF!

He punches ETHAN in the face, hard, sending him back against the sofa. In a fit of hysteria he runs to the window and flings the phone out into the canal, uncontrollable.

MICHAEL. There! Happy? (tears)

ETHAN is bleeding from his nose and mouth. Flecks of red on his white suit, stunned.

ADAM. If you do have too much to drink you'll end up in that canal.

ESTHER. That won't happen.

ADAM. What if I push you in?

ESTHER. I'll take you down with me.

ADAM. I'm an excellent swimmer.

MICHAEL begins to sob.

ESTHER. Isn't that a comforting fact. I'm going for a shower. This heat.

ADAM. I'll join you.

ESTHER. No you won't.

She crosses between all three men and off into the bathroom. Silence. Nobody moves.

MICHAEL. I... I don't know... I'm...

He steps toward ETHAN, who backs away and raises a hand in defence.

We hear running water coming from the shower, off.

ADAM looks about the room, wounded. He sits at one end of the sofa.

ETHAN. I'll just go and clean this up.

MICHAEL. Sorry.

ETHAN. I know you're sorry, Michael.

MICHAEL. I don't know why...

ETHAN. It's fine.

MICHAEL. No it's not. I'll go. If you want me to go I can go.

ETHAN. And where would you go, Michael? Home?

ETHAN walks toward the bathroom.

ADAM. Esther!

/MICHAEL. Ethan!

ESTHER steps out of the bathroom wrapped in nothing but a towel.

ETHAN stops and turns to look at MICHAEL.

ADAM/MICHAEL. Do you still love me?

Pause.

ETHAN. I could never stop.

He leaves.

Pause.

ESTHER. Nothing could ever make me stop, unfortunately.

She leaves.

MICHAEL breaks into weeping, his breath catching in his throat, inconsolable.

He falls across the sofa, lying with his legs up on the arm at one end and his head resting by ADAM'S legs, and he sobs into the cushion. ADAM remains staring toward the bathroom.

The music from the street outside begins to fade.

The running water from the shower soon becomes the sound of heavy rain fall.

ABIGAIL enters wearing her uniform and speaks to us...

ABIGAIL. Whenever I have that dream, where my Angel visits me, I can never remember how it ends. All I recall is walking on the ice and I'm holding on tight. The snow covers our tracks. Sometimes the surface creaks and splinters beneath my feet but I know that I'm safe. But we never seem to get anywhere. Or if we do I can never remember it. I wake up and it fades so quickly.

My Angel is there almost every time I close my eyes these days. It's like back when I was girl. Every dream is that dream. I sleep a lot now because I'm always so tired after work. But I've told them about the baby. I'm getting bigger. I've never felt so enormous.

Alma doesn't sleep so much. She can't get through a whole night and dozes off for huge chunks of the day. Then she gets mad about missing her shows on TV. And her health is getting worse. I've noticed it more and more. The weed isn't helping but she is in a lot less pain, or she doesn't recognise it's there anymore.

I still haven't given her the letter.

ADAM stands and paces the room before eventually leaving for the bedroom.

I'm staying in Michael's old bedroom. I hope he doesn't mind. I'll admit that it is much nicer staying here than sleeping in that big anonymous block of box-rooms. But it's seeing Alma deteriorating like this... she reminds me so much of my mother. She talks about the past more and more now, the war stories from Michael's teenage years. If you heard the things she tells me, you'd think the woman were a saint. I'm not being reassured about the joys of motherhood yet to come. Alma is an incredibly proud woman. I tried asking when she last got in contact with Michael but every time she'd change the subject or stops talking altogether. A mothers silence speaks volumes. That I know.

I was able to find some old records on our database at the hospital. According to her file Alma was treated with a course of anti-depressive drugs over a course of three years in the early nineties following the death of her son, Michael, who is buried in a small cemetery near the Italian coast, just outside of Venice. He was twenty-three years old.

MICHAEL finally stands and searches the room. Picking up the broken frame along with the sketch, he takes it off into the bedroom, wiping the tears from his face.

ADAM enters from the bedroom, passing MICHAEL as he does so. His clothes are different now. He carries some sheets of paper and a pen. Sitting at the coffee table, ADAM stares at the blank sheet for a moment before writing two words at the top then hesitates.

The letter stays with me at all times in my bag. I'm terrified I'll lose it. Though now I can't be certain it would even be of any worth to Alma if she did read it but I can't open it myself. It's all I have to know of him. This and what I can get from Alma about the old days when she knew him in his youth, on these very streets.

And this place suddenly feels much more like home.

ABIGAIL leaves. The sound of rain dies away.

ESTHER enters through the front door fully dressed. She carries a newly framed pencil sketch of herself and is beaming. ADAM stands quickly and turns.

ADAM. Back so soon?

ESTHER. It didn't take that long; though it cost more than I imagined.

She hangs the picture on the wall.

ADAM. And you're sure you want to leave it here?

ESTHER. It's a gift for Tobias. The room could use a little art work.

ADAM. I won't argue with that.

ESTHER. He'll make a fortune from this once you're a famous artist; a genuine "ARK" original from his brief summer retreat to Venice. His only ever sketch of the human form. Signed and dated.

ADAM. It'll be worth thousands.

ESTHER. Millions!

ADAM. I'm glad you like it.

ESTHER. You've no idea. You made me look so beautiful.

ADAM. I didn't have to try very hard.

ESTHER. And now a part of me will forever be in Venice.

ADAM. Forever. *(he lingers, staring at the sketch)*

ESTHER. I think this calls for a bottle of wine; maybe even two. I think I'm getting the hang of it now. I'll just clear this table up –

She goes to the coffee table and takes up the sheets of paper. One catches her eye.

ESTHER. Are you writing a letter?

ADAM. What? *(realising)* No –

ESTHER. Who's Alma?

ADAM is speechless. The couple stare across the room at one another.

Pause.

Blackout.

Interval.

ACT TWO

A slow return to the light.

ALMA is sat once more in her armchair, illuminated by the glow of her television screen, she is rolling herself a joint with some difficulty. When it is completed, ALMA turns about in her chair, searching for a lighter.

MICHAEL enters from the bedroom wearing his kimono and swigging from a bottle of white wine; he stumbles toward the window through which we can hear the distant buzz of festivities. The dim room is illuminated by fireworks. After a brief moment, MICHAEL turns away and places a record on the player: It plays “Un bel di” the aria from “Madame Butterfly” – MICHAEL sways to the melody and makes a poor attempt to sing along.

ESTHER enters her bridal suite, in a simple but elegant wedding dress. She sits at the dressing table and adjusts her hair and make-up in the mirror, struggling to achieve her desired appearance.

Relinquishing her search for the lighter, ALMA places the joint behind her ear and slouches into the chair, half-fixated on the television.

Draining the last of the wine, MICHAEL flops on to the sofa, still clutching the bottle to him he passes out.

ABIGAIL passes by; she is out of her nursing uniform and carries two handfuls of carrier bags and a bunch of carnations. She is now visibly pregnant.

Keys in the door. ETHAN enters the apartment, smiling as he hears the aria. He is noticeably intoxicated. Spotting MICHAEL sleeping he quietly leans over and places a kiss on MICHAEL’s forehead. MICHAEL stirs but does not wake. ETHAN tiptoes over to the record player and off the music before glancing back to MICHAEL as he enters the bedroom.

The house in Manchester – May 2013

ALMA now has her eyes closed, her head droops down onto her chest. Keys in the door. ABIGAIL enters the house with her shopping.

ABIGAIL. Only me.

ALMA does not move. ABIGAIL heads off into the kitchen.

ABIGAIL. *(off)* I bought us some green tea, thought you might like to try it –
meant to do wonders. It detoxifies your system. What do you think?

ALMA does not move. Pause.

ABIGAIL. Alma? (*entering*) Oh, sorry. I didn't realise you were napping.

ABIGAIL almost stands on ALMA's lighter. She picks it up from the floor and pockets it.

ABIGAIL. I don't think so. (*to ALMA*) I don't care what you read on the internet, it's *not* doing you any good – (*concerned suddenly*) Alma? Alma? Shit. Are you breathing – Alma?

She drops to her knees and begins to check for signs of life, finding nothing.

ABIGAIL. Alma? Speak to me, Alma. Come on. Not now... Shit!

With rising panic, ABIGAIL scrambles to her handbag, searching for her mobile.

ABIGAIL. You can't do this to me. You can't. Please...

ALMA. *(eyes closed)* Has it started?

ABIGAIL lets out a short gasp of shock and relief.

ABIGAIL. Shit. Has what started?

ALMA. That quiz show. I don't want to miss it. What time's it on?

ABIGAIL. What? I don't know. (*standing*) Christ, Alma.

ALMA. Did I scare you?

ABIGAIL. No.

ALMA. Never heard you swear before. You must have thought I'd copped it.

ABIGAIL. Only for a second.

ALMA. I should be so lucky.

ABIGAIL. Don't.

ALMA. You been shopping?

ABIGAIL. I got us some flowers to cheer the room up.

ALMA. Tulips?

ABIGAIL. Carnations.

ALMA. I prefer tulips.

ABIGAIL. I'll try to remember that.

ALMA. Have you seen my lighter?

ABIGAIL. I have it.

ALMA. Well would you mind givin' it here?

ABIGAIL. Actually I think I would.

ALMA. Stop messing about.

ABIGAIL. You're not getting it. That stuff is not real medicine and it'll only rot you're brain more, make yourself less in touch with reality than you are now. You understand? So, how about a nice green tea?

ALMA. You're not living up to your expectations, you know.

ABIGAIL. I'm still your nurse. (*exits off into the kitchen*).

ALMA. You're still a nightmare!

MICHAEL wakes up screaming.

The apartment in Giudecca – July 1991

Drenched in sweat, MICHAEL sits bolt up-right on the sofa. ETHAN comes rushing in from the bedroom wearing his kimono, he sits by MICHAEL.

ETHAN. What? What is it? Michael?

MICHAEL. Ethan! Ethan!

ETHAN. I'm here – calm down. You're burning up. What's wrong?

MICHAEL. I just had... it was horrible! I'm sorry...

ETHAN. Don't be ridiculous. Was it a bad dream or – ?

MICHAEL. It was stronger than that, like it was really happening. I was so scared.

ETHAN. It's over now –

MICHAEL. And I woke up and I thought you weren't here –

ETHAN. But I am here.

MICHAEL. (*grasping onto him*) I know you're here, I know. It was just so...

ETHAN. Tell me.

MICHAEL. I was standing on this frozen lake. It was dark; must've been night.
And it was so cold and it was snowing and I was wearing just this,

what I'm wearing now, not even shoes! My bare feet were touching the ice. And it was creaking and...

ETHAN. Go on.

MICHAEL. There was this man.

ETHAN. In the dream?

MICHAEL. He was so real. I couldn't see his face – he was just like a big shadowy outline in the snow. He held out his hand. But I didn't want to take it. I didn't want to move. I was too afraid the ice would give way if I took a step. My fuckin' heart pounding away in my ears. But he wanted me to go with him. And when I wouldn't he grabbed my wrist and started to pull me along. I tried to stop him, tried shaking him off, but he held on to me so tight. And I could feel the ice under me starting to crack. I was fighting and hitting him but he just kept dragging me, the bottom of my feet scraping 'cross the floor – they were bleeding. I saw the blood! They were bleeding!

ETHAN. It's okay, Michael, it didn't happen, not really.

MICHAEL. But I feel like it did! Like I was there!

ETHAN. I know –

MICHAEL. I told him to stop, the man, told him to let go of me. I could feel the ice breaking under me. And when he let go, I fell – straight through the ice, into the water. I never knew a pain like it – like I was on fire, but cold. You know? And I was sinking. I couldn't swim. I couldn't get myself back. I just kicked the water round me but it didn't help. My whole body started seizing up. And I looked up and *he* was there; the

man with no face, staring down at me through the hole in the ice. It went dark. I couldn't breathe. Then I woke up.

ETHAN. Michael...

MICHAEL. Have you got a cigarette?

ETHAN. I think I have one left. I'll just –

MICHAEL. Ta.

ETHAN. *(heading into the bedroom)* They don't mean anything, dreams. You know that. *(off)* Just a bunch of jumbled images from your subconscious – they're nothing to actually be scared of. Aha! Here we are. The last soldier.

MICHAEL. Are you drunk?

ETHAN. *(returning)* No more than you. Is that the only bottle you've polished off this evening?

MICHAEL. Seems unlikely. How was the festival?

ETHAN. Magnificent. You should have been there –

ETHAN tries to light the wrong end of the cigarette. MICHAEL takes it from him.

MICHAEL. I saw the fireworks from here. I like funny-drunk Ethan

ETHAN. I'm so glad you think so. Brandy?

MICHAEL puts the cigarette in his mouth the correct way and ETHAN lights it.

MICHAEL. You've had enough, old man.

ETHAN. I can assure you I most certainly have not! How dare you imply *(he begins mockingly prodding at MICHAEL who plays along, laughing)* that I

am a sodden old drunk! Hmm? How dare you! Give me back my cigarette, you can't have it now...

MICHAEL. *(laughing)* Stop! Have it! Just stop poking me – whoa! Stop!

The playful struggle lulls and the pair recline on the sofa.

ETHAN. There. Bet you've forgotten all about that nasty dream.

MICHAEL. Don't. I reckon I'll never forget that man. He was terrifying.

ETHAN. I wonder who he was.

MICHAEL. Whoever it is, I hate him.

ETHAN. *(light-heartedly)* I hope it's not me.

MICHAEL. How could it be you?

ETHAN. I don't know. I think it must've been a wicked spirit or something.

MICHAEL. A demon.

ETHAN. The Bogeyman! *(laughs)* Well, gone now.

MICHAEL. I hope so.

ETHAN. You see? You should have let me teach you how to swim! Then you'd have stood a fighting chance. Hmm?

MICHAEL. Don't talk stupid.

ETHAN. What? You have to learn some day. Who will I swim with at the beach?

MICHAEL. What beach?

ETHAN. I don't know. Some exotic beach we live beside. In our mud-hut.

MICHAEL. Villa!

ETHAN. Eating whatever the fisherman has caught that day.

MICHAEL. Just as long as it's hot. And there's no rain.

ETHAN. Deal.

MICHAEL. Are there any nice beaches like that Japan?

ETHAN. Why?

MICHAEL. I don't know. You've never been but you've got all their bloody gear. I'm sure you'd love to actually live there. Maybe we should find a house on a beach in Japan. Show off our kimonos. Eat fish. Swim.

ETHAN. Sounds perfect. Is that what you'd want?

MICHAEL. In for a penny...

ETHAN. Maybe a little son or daughter to keep us on our toes...?

MICHAEL. Maybe. If you're very lucky. And if they don't mind that sort of thing in Japan, of course.

ETHAN. It's a plan. Maybe this time next year...

MICHAEL. Maybe.

ETHAN closes his eyes and begins to hum "Un bel di" – MICHAEL rests against him.

The sound of humming continues...

The bridal suite of a hotel, Edinburgh – March 1972

ESTHER is humming to herself; she stands and paces the room anxiously. She resumes her seat at the dressing table in silence. Staring at her own reflection, she is lost in her thoughts.

A knock at the door jolts her back into reality.

ESTHER. Finally. Come in, I'm ready.

ADAM enters. He is not dressed for a wedding, carrying a large bag. ESTHER freezes, unable to speak. ADAM smiles in awe at her a moment. Pause.

ADAM. You look –

ESTHER. What are you doing here?

ADAM. Sorry. Bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, I know.

ESTHER. It is if you're the groom.

ADAM. That's who I told the girl on reception I was. Said it was a matter of life and death and I had to see the bride right away.

ESTHER. Are you insane?

ADAM. Probably.

ESTHER. This isn't fair.

ADAM. No. What isn't *fair* is ruining both your lives by doing this.

ESTHER. How dare –

ADAM. Not to mention ruining my life too.

ESTHER. And that's why you're really here. More than anything, you've come here for your own benefit – still that selfish boy, putting himself before everyone else.

ADAM. No, I mean it.

ESTHER. You need to leave. Sarah will be back any minute now. You're not getting what you want this time Adam, goodbye.

Pause.

ADAM. This is a fancy room. Very fancy. He must have some money this husband-to-be of yours. Is he Jewish?

ESTHER. Ex-Presbyterian actually, but thanks for making the assumption.

ADAM. Your father must be so proud.

ESTHER. It doesn't matter what he thinks. He can't make it over from the States. None of the family can. He has other daughters to make him proud.

ADAM. So that's why you're marrying this bloke, to piss your dad off?

ESTHER. I am marrying him because I *want* to.

ADAM. But why do you *want* to marry him?

ESTHER. Adam, stop it. Please.

ADAM. He's twice your age.

ESTHER. He is not.

ADAM. What about all those things you wanted to do? You're study of European history stuff and the books you wanted to write and the travelling you had planned. Do you honestly think you can do that once you're tied down your old man? And what about when you start having kids, what then?

ESTHER. It'd be a miracle.

ADAM. Exactly. You can't have it all.

ESTHER. No, I mean it would be a miracle if I started having children.

ADAM. What do you mean?

ESTHER. I mean I went to the doctor and he told me I can't have babies.

ADAM. When was this?

ESTHER. Last summer, after Venice, I went to the doctor because I was feeling off; I was worried I might actually be pregnant. But then he gave me the news that it is almost statistically impossible I could conceive. I'm not built to be a mother. Not naturally.

ADAM. I'm sorry.

ESTHER. I'm not. Besides my husband has a son with his previous wife.

ADAM. You're actually willing to help raise another woman's flesh and blood like it was your own?

ESTHER. I would have done the same for your son had you told me.

Pause.

ADAM. You called him your husband. You're not married yet.

ESTHER. Why are you being so cruel?

ADAM. *I'm* cruel? Look at what you're doing here.

ESTHER. You need to leave –

ADAM. You don't want this.

ESTHER. How would you know? I haven't seen you in months, since I left you in Venice, not a word. And you show up here today of all the days you could have chosen –

ADAM. I thought you never wanted to see me again. I would have wrote/ to you but I couldn't find any words that would explain...

ESTHER. It's my wedding day, Adam! You're too late.

ADAM. I thought I could let you do it. I'd given up on the idea of trying to win you back. I was letting us both move on. And then I woke up this morning and... I couldn't let you do this to yourself. I had to come –

ESTHER. You *had* to come? And do what? What do you think is going to happen here?

ADAM. I'm trying to save you.

ESTHER. From being happy?

ADAM. From ruining your life!

ESTHER. I'm doing this so I can start my life.

ADAM. Sure it's not just so you can stay in this country?

ESTHER cracks ADAM across the face. Pause.

ADAM. Esther...

ESTHER. You should go.

ADAM. Please.

ESTHER. I don't know you.

ADAM. Listen to me. Please. Just listen... I'm not saying you should be with me instead, that isn't important anymore, but I'm trying to stop you doing something that will stop you from... from being who you are.

ESTHER. You don't know who I am. You've no idea.

ADAM. I know you're a cold cynical bitch when it suits you.

ESTHER. What?

ADAM. And I know that you're the cleverest person I ever met. I know that you can't handle your drink and that you only smoke in Venice. I know that when you *do* smile it makes everyone else in the room want to smile with you. And I know that you broke your arm when you were seven and still have that weird scar because the doctor was new and didn't have a clue what he was doing. I know you like snow. I know you're a Sagittarius but you don't believe in that all that "hokum bullshit" – you're words, not mine. I know how you look in the morning. I know you're allergic to zinc. I know your favourite sandwich is tuna. I know you hate your feet because you think they're too big when they're not. I know you want to prove yourself to everyone more than anything else in the world. I know you like Puccini. And I know that I lied to you and that I hurt you more than anybody has ever hurt you before in your life and I could never be sorry enough for that. Never.

ESTHER. Adam...

ADAM. I know.

ESTHER. The car should be here by now.

ADAM. Esther...

ESTHER. Where's Sarah got to? She should be here.

ADAM. Esther, I know marriage has never been the top of your list –

ESTHER. No. It's *you* who hates the thought of being married. You run away from any kind of commitment because you're scared.

ADAM. Of?

ESTHER. Becoming your father.

ADAM. And *you're* terrified of being alone!

ESTHER. Who wouldn't be?

ADAM. That isn't a reason for getting wed and you know that. You know that you don't want this.

ESTHER. Then what do I want?

ADAM. I don't know. I'm not supposed to.

ESTHER. But I don't know either. I don't know what I don't know.

ADAM. Then you need to ask yourself; will I be happy?

Long pause. ESTHER stares into her reflection in the mirror, unable to recognise herself.

ADAM. I reckon some questions are just easier to answer than others.

Pause.

ADAM. I should go. Sorry. I'll not bother coming to the ceremony, eh? No. I'd chew my lip off in that bit where the vicar asks if anyone has any objections. I'd have swallowed my fist. Bye Esther.

He swiftly exits, leaving ESTHER frozen at the mirror as she was before ADAM entered the suite. Long pause. ESTHER begins to cry. Finally she stands and runs from the room.

The house in Manchester – May 2013

ABIGAIL enters from the kitchen carrying two fresh cups of green tea.

ABIGAIL. He came back?

ALMA. I don't know if it was conscience or guilt or what, but he came back.

ABIGAIL. But he didn't stay?

ALMA. He couldn't even force himself to speak to me in person.

ABIGAIL. But he was trying to take some responsibility?

ALMA. Michael was about three. My sister sometimes looked after him when I went to work. She moved to Australia, I'd told you that, right? He must have found out that's where he was stopping and he went round there, pestering my sister to let him see Michael.

ABIGAIL. And she wouldn't let him?

ALMA. Did she heck – he'd not written or rung me to ask if he could see Michael, just assumed he had instant rights to him. And I tell you what – it takes more than a bodily fluid to make you a dad.

ABIGAIL. So he never got to see Michael?

ALMA. All he had to do was speak to me. That's all it would've took. I weren't gonna keep his son from him but he never went about it in any good way. I wasn't being precious over him; I just didn't want Michael to get confused.

ABIGAIL. He did have some right...

ALMA. Why do I get the feeling you're trying to defend him?

ABIGAIL. I'm not.

ALMA. Doesn't the father of your offspring have some rights, an' all?

ABIGAIL. It's complicated.

ALMA. Well it's never going to be easy when there's a little one involved.

ABIGAIL. We barely knew each other.

ALMA. But that hasn't stopped you from having it. You could've got rid.

ABIGAIL. So could you.

ALMA. No I couldn't. The law might've changed but I couldn't just have that life, that little bit of him and me, a product of that love for each other... I couldn't just have some doctor rip that from me. When Adam went away it was all I had left of what we had. He was mine. My child.

ABIGAIL. Then you can see why I had to keep it.

ALMA. Do you love this bloke?

ABIGAIL. We worked together. Well, we were in the same hospital. He's a porter back at my last place. I knew he never took me seriously; not in that way. Just every now and then we'd have these one-off moments, a night together here and there. We were never going to be in any sort of relationship but he's the closest thing I've had to one since my mother died. He was comforting but always just temporary.

ALMA. But you don't trust him with this?

ABIGAIL. I feel like if I tell him I'm pregnant and that I want to keep it he'll think that I've trapped him on purpose – that it's some sort of ploy to force him into some long-term thing with me.

ALMA. It is long-term. Like it or not, it's for the rest of your lives. And that's if you're lucky. If he's not interested, sod him. You're here now.

ABIGAIL. I can't stay here forever.

ALMA. Why not?

ABIGAIL. Drink your tea.

ALMA. No. It's rank.

ABIGAIL. It's good for you.

ALMA. I'm not here for much longer; I'm not interested in anything I'm not going to enjoy. Speaking of which, have you got my lighter, still?

ABIGAIL. I do and you're not having it.

ALMA. Spoilsport!

ABIGAIL. Dope-fiend!

ALMA. If you weren't expecting and I weren't such a terminal invalid I'd take a proper go at you.

ABIGAIL. Bring it on; I'd like to see you try.

ALMA. I would too.

ABIGAIL. Maybe later. I have other patients to see.

ALMA. I hope you're a cow to all of them too.

ABIGAIL. Nope. Only you get such special treatment.

ABIGAIL prepares to leave.

ALMA. Well if you're going out you might as well leave me my lighter...

ABIGAIL. Not a chance.

ALMA. Go on then, get lost. You've plenty of other sick people to torment.

ABIGAIL. I'm seeing this old guy this afternoon. He's about mid-eighties; getting over a broken hip, a widower, a touch of mild angina and suffers from constant flatulence. I was thinking of giving him your number, setting you both up; what do you think?

ALMA. I think you'd better ring one your doctor friends, my sides have split.

ABIGAIL. Your quiz show starts at four-fifteen, don't forget.

ALMA. I remember! I'm not some old biddy just yet.

ABIGAIL. Give it time. And drink your tea.

She exits.

ALMA. What time? I've none left.

The apartment in Giudecca – July 1991

ETHAN enters from the kitchen two small fresh cups of espresso coffee.

ETHAN. An alien?

MICHAEL. It's what I thought.

ETHAN. And that's what you told your mother?

MICHAEL. I was only six, seven at the most.

ETHAN. You told you're mother you were an alien?

MICHAEL. All the other kids I spoke to at school, the ones I could stomach a conversation with, they all had dads. Even if they didn't live with them, they knew them, saw them, went on the trips to pictures with them. I just assumed...

ETHAN. You just assumed you were the product of an extra-terrestrial experiment on your own mother; perhaps that you were even the second immaculate conception of mankind?

MICHAEL. She hated me for saying it.

ETHAN. I doubt she's ever hated you –

MICHAEL. I'd asked her about it when she came to pick me up from school.
Maybe she was embarrassed, I can't remember. But when we got home
I had to go to my room and I heard her crying.

ETHAN. Children always ask the hardest questions because they're always the
most direct.

MICHAEL. I didn't know why asking her had hurt her so much.

ETHAN. Some questions are easier to answer than others.

MICHAEL. After a bit she came up to my room. I can remember her sat on my bed,
squeezing me. She said I was her son and that was all that should
matter... I wasn't any different from those other kids, but I was special
and I was hers and nobody would ever change that.

ETHAN. You see, she could never hate you.

MICHAEL. But that was worse. She'd never give me an inch. I was trapped with
her because she had nobody else and she wouldn't let me go. She was
jealous of everyone I ever liked; she spoiled everything I touched
because she wanted me all to herself. She was selfish. She hated you.

ETHAN. I only met her once.

MICHAEL. Doesn't matter. I wanted to be with you so she hated you for it.

ETHAN. I hardly think that's the whole story –

MICHAEL. It's because she's sad. I was the only worthwhile thing she ever had
and she made sure I was leaving her sight. That's who she is.

ETHAN. I think you're being a little unfair –

MICHAEL. Why do I get the feeling your always defending her?

ETHAN. I'm just offering you an alternative perspective.

MICHAEL. You didn't live with her.

ETHAN. And you never spoke to her, you only ever shouted.

MICHAEL. Because I was mad at her.

ETHAN. Why?

MICHAEL. Because...

Pause.

ETHAN. Do you imagine it's because you never saw her as a person?

MICHAEL. I didn't have to, I saw her as my mother.

ETHAN. And for everything that ever made you sad or angry, or inadequate, or alone, or even foolish, you refused to find that fault in yourself or look anywhere else to place the blame but lay it all on the nearest person to hand, that person who loved you most and raised you single-handedly. Could that be it?

Pause.

MICHAEL. She did raise me all herself. She made me to feel this way. She has no one to blame but herself.

ETHAN. That's not what I'm saying, Michael –

MICHAEL. You think I like being me? I know exactly what I'm like. You don't believe I'd ever want to be different, to have been born somebody else? 'Cause I would. Sometimes I wish I could step out of this person I am and be better – I could be so much more. But that's never going to

happen, is it? This is who I am. I'm her self-made crowning fucking glory – the product of her twisted love.

ETHAN. But it is love. That is the right word?

MICHAEL. It doesn't always mean the same thing.

ETHAN. Can't you just try stepping out of yourself enough to see that she was just a woman doing what she felt was best for her child?

MICHAEL. Of course, I'm not blind to any of that, I know that!

ETHAN. Then you can at least forgive her?

Pause.

MICHAEL. Sometimes it's just easier to scream and shout than sit and talk.

ETHAN. But screaming at the world doesn't always make it listen.

MICHAEL. I can't forgive her. But it's because I'm scared to think that there isn't anything to forgive. You can't forgive a person loving you, that's all she ever did.

ETHAN. Then maybe you need to tell her that.

MICHAEL. I can't go back.

ETHAN. You can't stay away forever.

MICHAEL. Why?

ETHAN. You need to speak with her.

MICHAEL. Not now.

ETHAN. But you will?

MICHAEL. I will. I can't face up to it just yet.

ETHAN. You could write to her, call her up?

MICHAEL. No.

ETHAN. You'll go back to Manchester?

MICHAEL. You trying to get rid of me?

ETHAN. Will you go back?

MICHAEL. Promise. Soon. I'll go. Just I'll go when I'm ready to.

ETHAN. She'll be thrilled. You've no idea.

He kisses MICHAEL and holds him.

MICHAEL. Soon. When I'm ready.

ABIGAIL enters.

She speaks to us...

ABIGAIL. The pain was something she had simply ignored over time, putting the migraines down to stress or caffeine, and she was a woman determined not to slow down. When she finally took my advice and saw a specialist they found the tumour to be inoperable. There was that word that I loathed; I kept hearing it, what was it...? Malignant. It was a *malignant* brain tumour. After the scan results were back it was a matter of months, weeks.

I'm ashamed to admit it but in those final days of her life, my mother and I were the closest we had been in years. And in some ways it felt I never really knew the person she was until I saw her as this fallible, frail human being. She was just another patient who needed care. Her weakness made her so much more real to me than she had ever been

before. As her life came to an end she opened up to me after those decades spent saying so little. That repression she associated the British with must have been wholly inherited by us from the moment we became citizens.

We left Chicago not long after my father went missing. He simply walked out one night as we were sleeping and never came back. As my mother later told me, all that he left was the letter, sitting on the kitchen table addressed to a different woman than herself. Following the start to that heavy winter of '91, my mother booked our flights and were headed to Edinburgh for the new year. A new life.

It must have pained my mother to stay when the search proved fruitless. America is a big place; it's so easy to disappear. Esther never went back to the States after we settled in Scotland. She told me there was nothing to keep her there but obligation and that she had always preferred the ancient majesty of "bloody" Europe over the relative emptiness of the new world. My mother, ever the poet of anthropology. And ever the cynic.

She never remarried, never even looked at another man. On the rare occasions that she drank, and on those times she'd drink plenty, she would sit me down and educate me in all that was wrong with the organisation of society. Most particular of all, she'd warn me of the social trappings of men, marriage and fathers. By the time I was old enough to read her books I felt that I was reading the transcripts of every meaningful mother-daughter conversation from my childhood.

When we'd settled in to our new Scottish home and I was a little older, maybe eleven or twelve, I was hunting in my mother's room for her expensive make-up, the stuff she never wore unless it was for an

occasion she deemed to be of worthy significance. In the drawer by her bed I found an old newspaper article that had been ripped from the *Tribune*. It was just a small piece about the sighting of a man who was spotted walking out onto Lake Michigan in the midst of a snowstorm a couple of nights previous. Most of the shore was frozen over and despite these witnesses calling out to this mysterious figure, he wouldn't turn back and soon he was no longer visible. The man remained unidentified.

My mother walked in as I was reading.

She turned ghost white when she saw what I had.

That memory has never left me. And neither has that man on the ice.

It was a pain I've simply ignored over time.

From the dark, ALMA calls out in pain.

The house in Manchester – May 2013

ABIGAIL rushes to the armchair where ALMA sits clutching her side in agony.

ALMA. ABI! ABIGAIL... ABI!

ABIGAIL. Alma? What is it? Where does it hurt?

ALMA. My side... here. Stabbing...

ABIGAIL. Just take deep breaths.

ALMA. I want to be sick.

ABIGAIL. Here. Use this if you need it –

ABIGAIL pulls the metal paper bin underneath ALMA.

ALMA. It really hurts this time...

ABIGAIL. Just breathe. I'll fetch your pills.

ALMA. (*grasping ABIGAIL's hand*) Make it stop.

ABIGAIL. Let me get the pills.

ALMA. I just want it to stop. I'm gonna be sick –

ABIGAIL. Here, you can use this.

ALMA. (*moaning*) It hurts so much.

ABIGAIL. I know, I know, I'm sorry...

ALMA. You've no idea –

ABIGAIL. Don't worry, I'm here. You're not on your own. Breathe.

ALMA. He's not coming.

ABIGAIL. Who isn't? Who's not coming Alma?

ALMA. Michael.

ABIGAIL. Michael won't be coming? He won't be coming here?

ALMA. He's not coming. I lied. He can't come to visit me –

ABIGAIL. I know –

ALMA. You asked about him but I didn't tell you –

ABIGAIL. I know, Alma, you don't have to –

ALMA. He isn't coming back here. He's never coming back.

ABIGAIL. Don't upset yourself. You'll only make it worse. Alma...

ALMA. *(sitting back)* It's stopping. I can feel it –

ABIGAIL. Is it fading now?

ALMA. This heat. My lighter...?

ABIGAIL. I'm going to get your pills. Nice try.

ABIGAIL exits off into the kitchen.

MICHAEL enters from the bedroom. He carries one of ETHAN's ties.

ABIGAIL returns with a glass of water and two pills.

ALMA. That was the worst I've had so far.

ABIGAIL. Take these.

ALMA. I tell you what I'd prefer –

ABIGAIL. I'm not giving you the lighter.

ALMA. No, no. Not that. I need to ask you...

ABIGAIL. What?

ALMA. Must be hard, watching people like this just wasting to nothing. It must have been painful, watching it happen to those you know, 'cause you're aware of everything that's wrong with them, like your patients, you know exactly what their illness is going to do...

ABIGAIL. Yes. Very painful.

ALMA. I don't want to waste away. I don't want it to kill me.

ABIGAIL. I'm sorry, Alma. There's nothing I can do. I'm so sorry...

Pause.

ALMA. But there *is* something you could do for me.

ABIGAIL. Alma...

ALMA. You'd know what I'd need, how to do it, if I wanted to... you know, depart before take-off. Because I don't want this to finish me itself.

ABIGAIL. You can't ask me to do that.

ALMA. Don't make me beg.

ABIGAIL. I'm here to make you feel comfortable, not help/ you top yourself –

ALMA. Exactly. I want it to be comfortable. You'll know how to do that for me.

ABIGAIL. Is this why you wanted me to stay here? Have you planning this...?

ALMA. I've been getting worse; you can see that, I'm losing fast. And I'm not going to lose to it. I want to go the way I want to go; with a little shred of fuckin' dignity and this (*tapping her head*) up here, still intact. I can't breathe half the time, don't know what day it is or if I'm here or not. Days of endless agony bleeding into one another and there's nothing I can do but wait until every last bit of me is gone and I'm just a fetid vegetable, a lifeless parsnip, still sat in this fuckin' chair in front of the telly. I should be allowed that. I've earned that right to choose.

Pause.

ABIGAIL. You ask too much of me.

ALMA. You're going to be a mother... you'll need to get used to that.

Pause. ABIGAIL slowly walks away, leaving ALMA sat alone.

The sound of heavy rainfall...

The café in Edinburgh – April 1972

ADAM is sat alone at a table reading over a letter. It is late in the afternoon and the cafe is quiet now and all we hear is the rain. ESTHER enters with a coffee and her umbrella.

ESTHER. Is this seat taken?

ADAM. Go ahead.

ESTHER. Thanks.

Pause.

ADAM. Bad weather.

ESTHER. Torrential.

ADAM. It never seems to stop.

ESTHER. I'll not miss it.

ADAM. When do you have to go?

ESTHER. I have a plane ticket for tomorrow morning.

ADAM. Oh.

Pause.

ESTHER. I look forward to a decent cup of coffee.

ADAM. The place went downhill after I quit.

ESTHER. I don't know why we still bother coming here.

ADAM. This is where we met.

ESTHER. Five years this September.

ADAM. Where does the time go?

Pause.

ESTHER. Have you kept up with your art?

ADAM. I've got a pencil sketch of Portobello beach up in some local gallery.

ESTHER. Excellent.

ADAM. Would be if I got paid for it.

Pause.

ADAM. What about you, have you...?

ESTHER. Have I...?

ADAM. Done much doctoring since I last saw you? I don't know – ?

ESTHER. Chicago Press have agreed to publish one of my papers.

ADAM. That's great.

ESTHER. So that's quite exciting.

ADAM. That's... brilliant, yeah.

Pause.

ESTHER. What's that, is it a letter?

ADAM. It came today, yeah. It's from Alma.

ESTHER. You're two are finally in correspondence?

ADAM. No, first I've heard from her since I came back from Manchester. I gave her sister my address just in case she changed her mind.

ESTHER. And?

ADAM. And she says she's willing to let me see Michael on a regular basis, whenever I feel like; she wants to sort something long-term out.

ESTHER. That's good news.

ADAM. Is it?

ESTHER. Sure. I mean, that's what you wanted, right?

ADAM. I can't figure it out.

ESTHER. Figure what out?

ADAM. If the reason want to see him because it's what I know I should do or because it really is what I want to do. The lad turns four in less than a week. He's going to start remembering these times when he gets older. And I just can't seem to promise myself that I can be there, be what he needs, for the all that time. I don't want to be a hazy memory from his childhood or a person that flits in and out his life when it suits me... She can do it, Alma can do the long haul –

ESTHER. She's not much choice, Adam.

ADAM. But I sort of do. She's given me the choice. I have this opportunity –

ESTHER. Then take it.

ADAM. Over you?

Pause.

ESTHER. I'm not your family, they are.

ADAM. What if it's not family I want? What if it's you?

ESTHER. I can't promise you that your life would be any happier with me.

ADAM. It's not promises I want, I can't do promises, they mean nothing.

ESTHER. Then I promise never to make a single promise.

ADAM. And I promise likewise.

ESTHER. And whatever you decide to do, I accept it.

ADAM. Thank you.

Pause.

ESTHER. I'm not trying to sway your decision but... (*she produces an envelope*) I brought you a little incentive.

ADAM. What's this?

ESTHER. A plane ticket to Chicago. Only one-way I'm afraid.

ADAM. How did you – ?

ESTHER. The flight isn't for another month. I wanted to give you some time...

ADAM. This is...

ESTHER. I know. I'm sorry –

ADAM. Don't be.

ESTHER. It's paid for now so, it's up to you.

ADAM. Thank you.

ESTHER. Like I said, whatever you decide.

ADAM. Of course.

ESTHER. I'm not forcing you.

ADAM. No. Thank you.

ESTHER. There.

Pause.

ADAM. *(whispering)* My tea's gone cold.

ESTHER. *(imitating him)* I'll get you another.

She takes his cold tea and leaves, ADAM smiles.

The distant rumble of thunder.

The sound of heavy rain continues...

The apartment in Giudecca – August 1991

MICHAEL is sat on the sofa, holding ETHAN's tie. He has been crying.

Keys in the door. ETHAN enters with shopping, his white suit dotted with rain.

ETHAN. That was close. I made it inside just as it started pouring down. Rain at this time of year... can you believe it? I think we're in for a storm.

He goes into the kitchen.

(off) I got us a bottle of the good stuff seeing as you've finally acquired the taste for it. And I found us a video for tonight. It's a live recording of *Madame Butterfly* from the '86 production in Milan, very rare. What do you think? Quite a find. It's not like we'll be going out tonight. Not in this weather at any rate... Michael?

ETHAN returns from the kitchen with two full glasses of wine.

What is it, hmm? What's that, one of my ties?

Nothing from MICHAEL.

Michael? What is it now? I've only been gone for an hour, if that...
What could you possibly have gotten upset over this time?

Pause.

MICHAEL. We had a visitor.

ETHAN. Who?

MICHAEL. It was our neighbour from upstairs.

ETHAN. The murderous feng shui enthusiasts from above us?

MICHAEL. Yes.

ETHAN. What did they want.

MICHAEL. It was a *he*. I didn't catch his name. His accent was very thick.

ETHAN. Oh?

MICHAEL. His English was pretty awful... but from what I gathered he wanted to return this tie. This is one of yours, isn't it?

ETHAN. It certainly looks like it.

MICHAEL. I checked the wardrobe. It's definitely one of yours.

ETHAN. Now before you go off on one –

MICHAEL. He asked me who I was. I think he assumed I was the cleaner. When I told him he seemed surprised I existed at all. Turns out you've never even mentioned me to him.

ETHAN. Michael –

MICHAEL. He was very handsome, you know, in that greasy sort of way.

ETHAN. You're getting it all wrong –

MICHAEL. You kept saying I should get out more, didn't you? Thought I should get in touch with the locals, like *you've* been doing all this time.

ETHAN. Can I speak?

MICHAEL. No, you can't fuckin' speak, Ethan, because I don't want to hear another stupid lie from that disgusting mouth of yours! If you ever spoke again it would be too fuckin' soon.

ETHAN. I have *never* lied to you.

MICHAEL. SHUT UP!

Pause.

ETHAN. There is a reason behind all of this –

MICHAEL. And then once the spic had pissed off I had a look in your briefcase. Call me suspicious but I wasn't feeling very trustworthy at the time. I remembered the code this time. Can you guess what I found in there? Have a guess. Go on. I bet you know...

ETHAN. The plane ticket.

MICHAEL. Venice to Manchester. One ticket, one-way. Who's that for Ethan?

ETHAN. If you let me explain –

MICHAEL. Was that for me, Ethan? Was that another gift from you? You are too generous sometimes. Such an expensive present, but then I reckon it's probably the last one I'd be receiving from you. Once you've shipped me back to England I doubt I'll hear from you again.

ETHAN. Stop it Michael, please, I'm trying to –

MICHAEL. STOP TALKING! What did I tell you?

ETHAN. Why don't you stop shouting for a change? Or are you only ever happy when you get to scream and stomp about the place like a temperamental brat? What if I shout? You'd like that. We could row and yell at each other all night, just like being at home!

MICHAEL. Bastard.

ETHAN. You are truly never content unless you've got reason to hate, to extricate every nasty feeling within you. God knows I love you, Michael, I will never stop, but this is killing me. *You* are destroying me.

MICHAEL. What a shame I burnt that plane ticket. Now you're stuck with me.

ETHAN. I bought the ticket so you could go home for a while and patch things up with your mother.

MICHAEL. On my own?

ETHAN. I have a job here, Michael! Can't you see that? I'm an adult! I have responsibilities. I can't abandon the life I work so hard to maintain at the drop of a hat to zip across Europe because I feel like it. I'm not you. You need to grow up and make things right before this can go any further.

MICHAEL. Sanctimonious prick!

ETHAN. See? This is what/ I'm talking about. You're so blind-slighted at everyone else, getting angry with people instead of yourself –

MICHAEL. How dare you tell me I need to grow up with *you've* been shacking up with a guy literally right over my own head! I am sick of you being the unquestionable voice of fuckin' reason all the time when you're nothing but a sad sleazy old fuck-around!

ETHAN. You're jumping to conclusions *again* –

MICHAEL. Am I? Because I don't think I am this time. I think you've had the wool firmly over my eyes for a long fuckin' time; making me feel guilty for ever thinking you could ever possibly cheat when that is exactly who you are! You're a fuckin' cheat!

ETHAN. If that's what you think then you can't know me at all.

MICHAEL. What if you've caught something? Sleeping with all and sundry – you could have got anything. You could have given it to me. I could be infected because of you...

ETHAN. You're being paranoid.

MICHAEL. I could be sick. I could die. And it would be all your fault.

ETHAN. Stop it. Stop it now.

MICHAEL. The only comfort I'd take is knowing you'd die with me too.

ETHAN. How can you think so little of me?

MICHAEL. Get out.

ETHAN. We have to talk about this, Michael. You can't run away from this. We have to sort this out before you do something stupid.

MICHAEL. I took a pair of scissors to your dressing gown...

ETHAN. There's no getting away from this, you might as well face it now.

MICHAEL. I cut the thing to pieces...

ETHAN. Michael, please.

MICHAEL. I never liked it in the first place.

ETHAN. Michael!

MICHAEL. Ethan!

ETHAN. Talk to me!

MICHAEL. I'm fed up with words. You can go now.

ETHAN. It's raining.

MICHAEL. Then you'd better take a fucking brolly.

Pause. ETHAN stands frozen for a moment, wanting to continue but unable to keep up the fight. MICHAEL is still holding the tie. He sits and refuses to look at ETHAN.

The distant rumble of thunder.

ETHAN turns and leaves the flat. MICHAEL angrily withholds his tears.

Hold on this...

The sound of heavy rainfall continues...

The house in Manchester – June 2013

ABIGAIL enters with two cups of green tea. It is evening.

ABIGAIL. I think we're in for a storm. Have you seen the rain?

ALMA. How did you know about Michael?

ABIGAIL. I took a look at your old medical records.

ALMA. So you'll know all about my...

ABIGAIL. Yes. I'm sorry.

ALMA. Don't be. I'm not. It took me such a long time to stop blaming myself for what happened to him. We all make mistakes. We're none of us perfect. But you can't help looking back and thinking what might have been if you'd done things differently.

ABIGAIL. What caused him to leave in the end?

MICHAEL goes into the bedroom to retrieve his suitcase, opening it up on the sofa. He goes back and forth, bringing out clothes which he stuffs into the case. He's shaking.

ALMA. War takes its toll on everyone. In the end he just wanted to out. Had he kept down a single job or gone off to a college or something, we could've given ourselves some space. But that never happened. When he saw the chance to visit his fella who'd moved to Venice...

ABIGAIL. He just went?

ALMA. We'd been rowing more than usual. He was convinced I hated this new boyfriend of his because he was a few years older. Part of him always thought I was disappointed in him being *that* way. And I never was. He was my son. I loved him and nothing would ever make that stop. I'd known for years he was into men, probably before he even knew himself. What would that change about my loving him? He was all I had. And he knew that. He was so cruel.

ABIGAIL. Like you said, we all make mistakes. Our judgements from being children are hard to shake off sometimes...

ALMA. One day he'd just packed his suitcase and told me he was going.

ABIGAIL. That was it?

ALMA. No contact details, nothing. He wanted out. He was his father's son. I'd managed to drive another person I loved far away...

ABIGAIL. It's not your fault. You've suffered those thoughts enough.

Having packed his possessions, MICHAEL looks about the apartment. He stomps over to the wall and removes the framed sketch of ESTHER, placing it in his suitcase and closing it.

ALMA. I can still recall it; the last time he ever spoke to me. Like it was yesterday. He stood right there, suitcase loaded and said –

Suitcase in hand, MICHAEL turns from the apartment and faces ALMA, a memory.

MICHAEL. If you think I'm ever stepping foot in this house again then you'll be waiting a long fucking time. I'm done. This place is nothing but a history of misery and I can't spend another second in it. You are a twisted witch and I am going as far from you as I can to have the life I fucking deserve. And you can stay here. You can be alone. It's exactly what you deserve. Goodbye, Alma. I'm not coming back.

ALMA see's this before her, tears in her eyes. MICHAEL storms out the flat.

The distant rumble of thunder.

ABIGAIL reaches over and takes ALMA's hand.

ABIGAIL. He didn't mean it, he couldn't have.

ALMA. I saw the hate there in his eyes. And I wasn't his mother anymore.

ABIGAIL. You did what you could. That's all you can do.

Pause.

ABIGAIL. Should I put the TV on?

ALMA. It's packed in, won't come on. I've tried it.

ABIGAIL. Good excuse to shop for a new one.

ALMA. Not much point.

ABIGAIL. Stop talking like that.

ALMA. Do you still have my lighter?

ABIGAIL. You're not getting it.

ALMA. Anyone told you that you'd make a good prison officer?

ABIGAIL. I'll compromise. We can have a glass of that old brandy you keep under the sink and think I don't know about.

ALMA. It's a start.

ABIGAIL makes toward the kitchen.

ABIGAIL. Don't get up.

ALMA. I wasn't going to.

Checking to make sure ABIGAIL is out of the room, ALMA reaches down to pick up ABIGAIL's handbag which she rummages through in search of her lighter. Something catches her eye and she produces the sealed letter addressed to her.

ABIGAIL re-enters with two tumblers of brandy. Upon seeing ALMA she freezes.

Pause.

ALMA. What's this? Is this for me?

ABIGAIL. It is for you.

ALMA. Did you write this?

ABIGAIL. No.

ALMA. Well who's it from then?

ABIGAIL. It's from my father.

ALMA. What?

ABIGAIL. My mother gave me this letter to deliver before she died. It was the only thing my father left us before he went missing twenty years ago.

ALMA. Why would – ?

ABIGAIL. My father, Adam Kennedy.

Pause. ALMA stares at ABIGAIL, dumbfounded.

ALMA. You're *his* daughter?

ABIGAIL. I never planned all this. I had the letter for some time but never got the opportunity –

ALMA. And you've known all this time?

ABIGAIL. I had to make sure it was you. I don't know what it says.

ALMA. What good is this to me now?

ABIGAIL. I wasn't sure if you'd want to read it... I'm sorry.

Pause.

ALMA rips open the envelope and unfolds the letter.

ALMA. I can't see it properly. The writing's all... You read it.

ABIGAIL. Me?

ALMA. Go on, you can at least read it to me.

ABIGAIL takes the letter, her hand shaking; she holds it up and reads.

ABIGAIL. (*reading*) "Dear Alma,

I feel as if I have started writing this letter a hundred times and every time the words would always fail me. But I could not leave the words unwritten. Now I feel the time has come to write down what I could not say back that night in 1967 when you told me that we were going to be parents. Don't think I haven't punished myself every day for running away from you at that moment when you needed me most. I was a stupid kid. A boy who dreamed of a life beyond the one he'd been given. I was never really satisfied. That's not an excuse but that is simply what I was.

Back then I thought I was running for the sake of my freedom, to not be that house-held man who worked to keep that family he could happily live without. What I know now is that I lost out on so much more than I could ever gain. I missed out on being the father that boy wanted and that has haunted me every day since the moment I walked out. It didn't matter how far away I went, there he was, you both were, with me always.

I was given a second chance. This time was meant to be different but now I find myself where I never wanted to be. I am that man with the family home, the job that never fulfils him and the growing distance of those around him. And I can't find anyone to blame for how I feel or anyone who can explain why I'm so discontent. I look into the eyes of my little daughter and I love her unconditionally, but it somehow isn't enough. I don't know what I don't know. If only I could figure out what I even expect life to give me, but I can't. All I know is that nothing lives up those indefinable expectations I can't seem to shake off.

But it is this, for want of a better word, love which holds me back
whilst it drives to go on, and I am irreparably torn by it.

I don't regret the path I've taken and I don't fear the steps I take now.

All I wanted to say was that I'm sorry. We can't live in the world of
"if only" but I know that things could have been so different from the
way things went. And I hope Michael is happy. I know that thanks to
you and you alone, he will have grown into an excellent man and one
far better than I could ever be. I'm sorry I could never face you, that I
could never be there as a father, but it was perhaps for the best I
wasn't. I would have only let you down too. After almost twenty-five
years am I ready to admit that and I would never expect you to forgive
me. All I hope is that you're life has been full and happy without me.

Goodbye Alma, I could never forget.

Adam."

Pause. ALMA takes the letter from ABIGAIL and re-reads.

ALMA. Bastard.

*ABIGAIL produces the lighter from her pocket and gives it to ALMA. She proceeds to light
the corner of the paper and let it burn. ABIGAIL holds the small metal bin beneath her and
ALMA drops the letter in. The two women sit and watch the flames.*

Hold on this...

O'Hare International Airport, arrivals lounge, Chicago – May 1972

*ESTHER enters, looking anxiously about her, waiting. The airport is noisy with the
constant throng of arriving passengers and announcements from the speakers.*

Hold on this...

After helping ALMA to her feet, ABIGAIL takes the cup of green tea and pours it over the bin, extinguishing the flames before the pair leave.

ETHAN enters through his front door; phone in hand he begins to dial.

The apartment in Giudecca – August 1991

ETHAN stands with the phone to his ear as it calls out.

ETHAN. Hello? Hello. Miss Johnson? Yes. It's Ethan Cole, we've spoken on the phone before... yes, *that* Ethan, yes. It is about Michael, yes, I thought it best to ring you first, before you receive anything official. I wasn't sure... Miss Johnson? Sorry, Alma... Alma, I'm ringing because I have to tell you... they found Michael's body earlier this morning in the canal. (*pause*) The police have started an investigation but it looks to be accidental, either he fell or... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, but I thought it best... Hello? Yes. I felt I should let you know as soon as... yes, and I was thinking about him and what you might want to do about the body. You don't have to make any decisions straight away but I wanted you to know I'd be more than willing to cover the cost of flying him home... Pardon? Oh. As is said, it wouldn't be a problem if you couldn't afford... No? If you're sure. Of course. No, of course. I would try sending a his things back for you, he didn't bring much, but they're water damaged see, he was packed and the suitcase was found in the... I don't know. I don't know why he had his suitcase. Listen, I'll let you think about it and call back again later, you must want some time... You - ? Very well. Someone from the authorities should contact you soon; I'm not sure how these things work. I'm sorry. Yes. Of course, I

can make all those arrangements. No, I couldn't ask for a penny off you – I just think you might want to reconsider...? Okay. I can do that. Yes, Miss Johnson, I can do that. And I'm sorry, Miss Johnson, I'm so sorry, I'm so –

We hear the phone ring off.

ETHAN puts down the phone. After a moment of composure he covers his face with his hands and screams into them, it is prolonged and painful, before leaving.

ABIGAIL enters with a bunch of tulips. She is profoundly showing her pregnancy.

ABIGAIL. He's gone now, my Angel. The dream still comes back from time to time. There I am, on the ice, taking one careful step after the other. But the Angel is nowhere in sight, no longer there at all. And I'm not upset; I'm not saddened by his disappearance. If anything I think the Angel left a long time ago and now I find that I never needed him there to begin with. I walk on through the snow, like that song, how does it go...? You know the one I'm thinking of. That one.

There were, unsurprisingly, very few people at the funeral. Alma spent so much of her later life seeming to cut the ties to her earlier one. No work colleagues or past friends; though her dealer and his mother came and sat through the service, which was kind of them. Her sister flew in from Australia to oversee all the arrangements, along with her husband, her eldest daughter and two beautiful grandchildren. When I met her she came right up to me and hugged me and said how highly Alma had spoken of her new nurse during their last few phone calls together.

It seems that before she went, Alma had been busy planning a few more surprises for me to follow her departure; the first and largest

surprise being her house and everything in it. Having saved up her whole working life, Alma was able to buy her house from the council just a few years ago, before she fell ill. After another phone call to her solicitor, I was bequeathed her home for myself and “the little one”. Not only the house but every penny she had left was put into my name to help provide for me now that I’m on leave from nursing. All that time I had no idea what the old girl was up to. Sorry, not old...

I’m not a religious person, as I said, though I hope that Alma is somewhere happy, somewhere peaceful. And I hope Michael is there with her. That’s what I like to imagine.

Everybody needs a second chance, don’t they?

I’ve booked myself a train home. Not home. Scotland. Old home. Though I have been recommended not to travel at this stage, I’ve been busy with deeds and documents, but I can’t keep putting things off. I have to face up to those things I dread sooner rather than later.

It’s important to face what you don’t know for certain or I guess you’d never learn anything. I don’t know what I don’t know. Some things I will never know. And I’m okay with that.

But there are things I do know.

I know I am doing the right thing now.

ABIGAIL takes the tulips to a headstone, beside a bench.

Giving up any hope of seeing him, ESTHER turns to leave as ADAM enters.

ESTHER. You came.

ADAM. I had to.

ESTHER. But what about...?

ADAM. It's you. I chose you. You won me.

ESTHER. I stole you.

ADAM. This is everything I want and that's all I know right now.

ESTHER. And what about tomorrow?

ADAM. We'll work on it.

ESTHER. No promises?

ADAM. Not one.

ESTHER. Then let's go home.

They take each other's hand and begin to leave.

ADAM. So what's the weather like here, does it rain much?

ABIGAIL. Wait 'til you see this city in the winter...

The General Cemetery, Harpurhey – August 2013

The sun is beating down, a beautiful day. The headstone before ABIGAIL reads –

ALMA MARY JOHNSON
4th March 1947 – 21st June 2013
A LOVING MOTHER

As ABIGAIL places the tulips on the grave, ETHAN enters. He wears a smart brown suit and his hair is greying. ABIGAIL barely notices him as she sits on the bench.

ETHAN. Anybody sitting here – may I?

ABIGAIL. Take a seat.

ETHAN. Thank you.

Pause.

ETHAN. Glorious weather, isn't it?

ABIGAIL. Wonderful.

ETHAN. It's been quite a summer.

ABIGAIL. Hasn't it?

ETHAN. You might almost forget you were in England at all.

ABIGAIL. Yes.

Pause.

ETHAN. I'm sorry for asking but, why tulips? They're not exactly the traditional choice.

ABIGAIL. She preferred tulips.

ETHAN. Were you close?

ABIGAIL. I was her nurse for the last six months. We became good friends.

ETHAN. I didn't even know she was ill. It's no age to go these days, is it?

ABIGAIL. She was very sick for a long time.

ETHAN. I only hope she didn't suffer. How did she...?

ABIGAIL. I think she went the way she wanted to go.

ETHAN. That's some comfort at least. I missed the funeral. I was abroad.

ABIGAIL. Are you a relative or...?

ETHAN. I knew her son.

ABIGAIL. Michael?

ETHAN. I lived with him for a brief time.

ABIGAIL. In Venice?

ETHAN. I take it she told you...?

ABIGAIL. Everything.

ETHAN. We only met in person twice. Once when Michael insisted I come to their house for dinner, which I seem to remember ending in a hideous argument and a three broken plates, and once more at his grave. It must have been about six months after his burial, just before I left to Prague. As I get older I find myself standing by more and more graves of people I knew. When did that happen?

ABIGAIL. You kept in contact?

ETHAN. For a while. I knew she was alone after Michael went and I sent her letters for a time but life soon gets in the way. He meant such a lot to both of us but I think I was just becoming a painful reminder of the loss we were sharing. They didn't exactly part on the best of terms.

ABIGAIL. I think that's what haunted her the most.

ETHAN. But he did care about her, I could see that. He knew that she loved him.

ABIGAIL. Then he should have told her while he has the chance.

ETHAN. Things seem so easily fixable with hindsight, don't they? So much of life seems to be wishing we could do everything we've done before and make it better by doing it differently.

ABIGAIL. Do what you can now or live with the regret.

ETHAN. Exactly.

He produces a packet of cigarettes, removing one for himself.

ETHAN. Do you mind if I - ?

ABIGAIL. Go ahead.

ETHAN. I mean, what with you being -

ABIGAIL. I'm not fussy about that sort of -

ETHAN. I should really have stopped by now.

He lights the cigarette.

ETHAN. May I ask when you're due?

ABIGAIL. Oh, imminently. Should be any time now. If we sit here too long you're in danger of delivering it yourself.

ETHAN. I imagine you're very excited?

ABIGAIL. Terrified.

ETHAN. And what about baby's father, is he scared too?

ABIGAIL. There isn't a father.

ETHAN. What a coincidence, my son doesn't have a mother.

ABIGAIL. Oh. I'm sorry...?

ETHAN. Don't be. His other father makes up for it.

ABIGAIL. I see. What's his name, your son?

ETHAN. Tobias. Or Toby.

ABIGAIL. Good name. Like the saint.

ETHAN. He's eighteen; going to university next month. And I have to admit that I'm feeling terrified myself. You never stop, unfortunately.

Pause.

ABIGAIL. He's in Scotland.

ETHAN. Who is?

ABIGAIL. The father. He doesn't know about the baby.

ETHAN. Ah.

ABIGAIL. I ran away because I didn't know what to do.

ETHAN. And now?

ABIGAIL. I've booked a train. It leaves in about an hour. I should go, shouldn't I?

ETHAN. Do what you can now or live with the regret.

ABIGAIL. You're right. Because it doesn't matter, does it? He either accepts us or he doesn't. And whatever he decides then I will cope with, I can deal with it. Yes? But if I don't tell him...

ABIGAIL wells up, ETHAN produces a handkerchief.

ETHAN. Here. Things work themselves out, you know that.

ABIGAIL. I just think about Alma and Michael and just how wrong this could go. I could ruin both our lives. What if I completely screw this child's life

up? I'd never forgive myself, the guilt would... because I'd be the one to blame, I'm responsible, and I'm not sure I know how I'm going to do any of this...

ETHAN. All those things you're worrying about, guilt, forgiveness, blame, responsibility; I think they're all just other words for love. And if you have that then you're going to be a great mother.

ABIGAIL. She was so alone. For so many years.

ETHAN. You're not Alma.

ABIGAIL. But I'm just so scared...

ETHAN. The best adventures are always the scariest. And I think being a parent is probably the biggest adventure you can go on...

ABIGAIL. I believe you.

ETHAN. (*smiling*) You should.

Pause. ETHAN stubs out his cigarette.

ABIGAIL. I think I have a train to catch.

ETHAN. Then I wish you the best of luck, uh – ?

ABIGAIL. Abigail.

ETHAN. It was pleasure meeting you, Abigail. I'm Ethan.

They shake hands, formally.

ABIGAIL. Ethan. Nice name. Thank you. I'm sorry I got all emotional and –

ETHAN. Pregnant woman; I get it.

ABIGAIL. But thank you.

ETHAN. And keep the handkerchief.

ABIGAIL. Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't –

ETHAN. I have hundreds; souvenirs from my last trip to Japan.

ABIGAIL. Well thank you, Ethan.

ETHAN. Not at all.

ABIGAIL. I have to... Goodbye Ethan.

She begins to walk away.

ETHAN. Goodbye.

ABIGAIL turns back and kisses ETHAN on the cheek.

ABIGAIL. Help yourself to a tulip.

She leaves.

ETHAN looks after her before turning back to the headstone. Bending down he takes a single tulip from the bunch, stands and tucks it into his button hole. He looks about him then up to the blue skies before taking a deep breath, then walks away.

THE END.